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by Brett Halliday

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MIKE SHAYNE

MYSTERY MAGAZINE

KILLING TIME

by Brett Halliday

Shayne sat by the phone, waiting for it to ring yet dreading it. Someone was going to die tonight—and he could very well be the victim!... 4

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Standing in the doorway, framed by the smoking lights around the entrance, was one of the biggest men Shayne had ever seen—six feet, seven inches tall, 280 solid pounds, and ready to destroy anyone that got in his path. The big man reached out, grabbed the detective, and threw him across the room like a stuffed toy!

Killing Time

by BRETT HALLIDAY

MIKE SHAYNE LEANED BACK AND PROPPED HIS STEEL-toed size twelves upon the desk in his darkened Flagler Street office. The longer he had been sitting there, the louder the ticking of the grandfather clock in the outer office had grown. His right hand reached around to the small of his back till it touched the familiar steel. Pointing the Smith and Wesson through the open door of his private office at the damned timekeeper, he clicked his tongue.

About two weeks ago his brunette secretary had picked up the cherry monstrosity at a rummage sale down the block. Despite being two feet tall with a tarnished pendulum, it added class to the office, Lucy had said.

And all of it third, Shayne thought. The weather-worn Seiko on his wrist was all he needed. It kept perfect time, and unlike the thing on the wall, its face wasn't pretentiously pockmarked with Roman numerals.

"Sure it's a little noisy, Michael," Lucy had argued, "but it's been around for years, it's dependable, and it's sturdy—sort of like you."

"Only I don't bong like Big Ben every hour and half hour," he had protested.

As usual she had won. And now, holstering his .38, the big detective recalled how he fought a daily battle against sending it to that Great Repair Shop in the Sky.

BONG! BONG! . . .

11:00, he noted. At least Lucy was right about one thing. The mechanized monster was dependable.

The redhead rose to stretch. Shouldn't be much longer, he reflected. He had been sitting alone in his office on a hot July night for almost three hours. Maybe that's why the clock had seemed to be getting louder.

Three hours. Around 8:00 he had had to lie to Lucy to get her out of the office.

"CALL IT A DAY, ANGEL," HE HAD BEGUN.

"But, Michael, as long as you're going to hang around here, I might as well stay. I mean, you can't be here and as we planned at my place at the same time."

"Angel . . ."

"Why don't we send out for some pizza and beer. Ever since the deli started carrying Tuborg, you . . ."

"I'm not hungry."

She moved closer to his desk. "Well, I do have a lot of filing still to catch up with."

"Go home." Casually he tossed a manila folder over a newspaper on his desk.

"You're not waiting for someone, are you?"

"Well, I'm . . ."—he stumbled.

Lucy Hamilton's brown eyes kindled, then flamed. "A woman. You're waiting for some woman. And I thought we had a . . ."

"O.K., I'm waiting for a woman." The lie emerged coldly like a beast from its lair on a winter survival hunt. "Why don't you go home. I'll see you in the morning."

In a single motion she swept up her purse and headed through the door. "Don't bet on it, buster. I might just find someone who appreciates me more to spend my night with."

SHAYNE REMOVED THE MANILA FOLDER FROM THE LATE-afternoon edition of the *Miami Globe*. On the bottom of the front page the headline glared: FERRALL ESCAPES STARKE. The redhead scanned the story for the fifteenth time . . . two guards knifed, one's back broken . . . small riot as diversion . . . plumbing ripped out . . . warden held hostage.

The tense detective put the paper down. It was a story he could have written—a year ago. He flipped through the manila file of the Stuart case. Amidst some reports and clippings he paused to rub his jaw. The

pain still seemed so real. Was it only eighteen months ago that it had all begun?

The tiny, orange-haired woman with an almost-suffocating odor of musk about her made an unlikely herald. Over thirty and still freckled, she had burst into the office late one Friday afternoon.

"I DON'T HAVE TIME TO WAIT FOR AN APPOINTMENT," she had screeched as she advanced toward Lucy.

"Michael," said his secretary, blocking the detective's doorway, "I've given her the quickest available appointment, the end of next week."

Shayne looked away from his client, Mr. Benson. The senior citizen had been explaining how he was swindled by a con man posing as a federal bank examiner.

"By next week, you bitch," retaliated the redhaired woman, "Stan could be dead, and I'd have nothing."

Shayne pushed back his chair and stood up. "Hold it, lady," he said, using the term loosely. "Nobody comes into my office screaming like a wounded banshee."

"Get Gramps out of here so we can talk," she commanded, pushing past the brunette.

"You want to talk to me," the detective said angrily, "you do what everybody else does—make an appointment."

She reached into her purse abruptly. Out came a handful of bills. "This says I talk to you now."

Shayne's Irish temper flared. "Lady, if you knew me, you'd know money doesn't buy me. I take a case because I want to, because the clients look like they need help. You don't meet either standard." He held up his meaty palms. "Now, these say you make an appointment or get out of here."

Unexpectedly she began to cry. Her body dropped to the hardwood floor like a tenement whose foundation had just been blown. In seconds she began to jerk, to rock spasmodically. If she were an actress, decided the redhead, she was in line for one of those little gold statues.

"Mr. Benson," he said, "I've got most of your story. My secretary will take the rest of your statement, and I'll be in touch. Lucy, you can forget the man's retainer. We'll do it on a percentage of recovery base." As his secretary helped the septuagenerian out, Shayne offered the sobbing woman the empty chair. "Calm down, and tell me who this Stan is and why you think he could be dead."

"Stan—Stan is my husband. He's a little bit older than me, but such

a nice man."

Shayne sat back in his chair and torched the last of a pack of Camels.
"Why would someone want to harm a nice man like your husband?"

"Blackjackpot." She spat the word out like it had been venom she had just sucked from her system. "That damned Blackjackpot."

"What is Blackjackpot?"

"One of those videogames." She wiped the corners of her eyes. "Stan owns a few restaurants that are located near the bay. Seafood places. Caters mostly to the local trade rather than the tourists. Stan has never liked snowbirds. One day this guy comes by The Swordfish—that's the place where Stan has his office—and makes him an offer he says my husband better not refuse."

"What kind of offer?" said Shayne, catching more scent than her cheap perfume.

"50-50 deal. He supplies the machines—Stan puts them in his restaurants."

"Only this wasn't your typical business operation?"

"Right." She put his handkerchief on the desk between them. "The machines pay off. Well, that's illegal."

"And Stan never does anything illegal."

"Well, maybe he puts down a few too many charities on his income tax form, but other than that, no. Hey, if the fish is starting to spoil, he don't make no chowder, if you know what I mean."

Shayne had visited enough ptomaine palaces to know. "What you're saying is this man is tempting your husband."

"Yes and no. First, the guy's no man. He's an animal. Calls himself Johnny Ferrall. Stan says he used to be a club boxer. You can tell. The brute is well over six-feet tall and almost three-hundred pounds. One of Stan's bouncers tried to throw the guy out and got his nose busted. It's going to take plastic surgery to make Sal look even semi-human again."

"A gangster."

"A gangster's human. This Ferrall isn't."

Shayne exhaled. "What do you mean?"

"Ferrall didn't like Stan's answer, so he threw him through the plate glass window in front. Then, with Stan's lunch crowd sitting around he proceeded to break half the tables and chairs in the place. He warned the customers if they ever showed their faces inside The Swordfish again, he'd do to them what he did to Sal and Stan."

"Did you report this to the police?"

"Of course. We swore out a complaint. Then we got a call that night that said if we didn't tell the cops nevermind, The Swordfish was going

to be the first of six fires."

"What did you do?"

"Nothing. The Swordfish went up in smoke the next night. When Stan went to the police, somebody paid him a visit later on and beat him up. Stan's in Miami Mercy in intensive care right now."

"What did the police do about it?"

"Very little. Stan's been unconscious for three days now. He's the only one that can tell them who did it, but I know."

"What would you like me to do?"

"Get this Johnny Ferrall and put him in the Miami Zoo where he belongs."

The redhead chose his words carefully. "I don't want to sound insensitive, but there's very little I can do. You need two things I'm not—the police and a bodyguard. When your husband recovers, as I'm sure he will, have him swear out a warrant for this Ferrall if he's the man who did it. Second, if you want a bodyguard to protect your husband, I have too many cases at the moment, too many people who need me, to junk them all and protect your husband. If you would like the name of a good security outfit, I could recommend . . ."

"You don't understand."

"Maybe I do and maybe I don't care to. Because there's a third possibility of what you want from me, and I wouldn't like to know you were thinking about that."

"You won't help," she said, standing up.

"I can't."

"You bastard."

THE TICKING WALL CLOCK SOUNDED TO SHAYNE LIKE A machine gun firing in slow motion. 11:15. He got up and walked to the edge of the window. Flagler Street thrived with activity—most of it illegal. A penny-ante drug buy went down. A limousine with a municipal plate pulled up to the curb. An amazonic black prostitute in tight-white shorts and little else leaned in to give the occupant a closer view of the merchandise. Then she got in and the limo lept ahead, almost striking two kids who were breakdancing to the shrill voice of a ghetto-blaster.

Ferrall was out there—somewhere. Deep in his skull the primitive alarm that had kept the redhead alive for so many years exploded.

Involuntarily Shayne stepped back from the exposed window. As he did, his eye caught something out of its corner that seemed alien to the familiar tableau below. He glanced again. Whatever it was he had seen, nothing registered consciously.

He peered back out into the yellow-lit night.
Nothing.

The other primeval instinct reared its ugly head in his consciousness.
The one he never let himself feel.

Fear.

Admitting it didn't make things better. Since adolescence, he had always believed he could catch anything life threw at him and return it harder than it came. Nobody survived in his business, not in the parts of town he prowled, if they walked hand in hand with fear. You walked alone or you didn't walk.

But Ferrall was different. Yeah, Mrs. Stuart had been right. Guys like Ferrall had the kind of charts you usually found in the records of the Miami Zoo.

THE WATER-SOAKED CLOTHING STUCK TO THE REDHEAD like a second skin as he pushed open the doors to the Emergency Room. He was cold and tired.

The room exploded in sounds and bodies as someone yelled "Code 99." A burly nurse pushed him to one side as she rushed toward a gurney over which half-a-dozen men and women in surgical green and nurse white began to work feverishly. Their activity was orchestrated by buzzers and beeps from a bank of expensive-looking machinery.

"Stand clear!" ordered a harsh voice.

Shayne watched the prostrate body beneath the gurney's green sheets jerk from two contacts on its chest.

"Defibrillate again."

"Everyone clear."

"Go."

No response.

A doctor grabbed a huge syringe. "I'm going for the heart." He spewed the liquid at Shayne's feet, then plunged the needle downward like a dagger into the unconscious figure's chest.

Again, nothing.

The tall surgeon shook his head and stepped back. Shayne heard the equipment's incessant monotone confirm the doctor's diagnosis.

Silence.

"You bastard, you damned bastard," came a shrill voice from behind him.

Two fists pummeled his back in a berserk rage.

Shayne turned to see the small, orange-haired woman. Again he was assaulted by the heavy scent of musk that even overpowered the anti-

septic smell of the E.R.

"That's my Stan lying there, Mr. Fancy Detective. Out of Intensive Care for only two weeks and he's run over by a fleeing car. How does it feel to know you've killed him?"

"I what?" said Shayne.

"While you were looking for some society dame's lost poodle, a guy who really needed your help just died."

"What happened to him?"

The angered woman slapped him hard. "I told you Ferrall was going to kill Stan, but you wouldn't listen. You wouldn't take any time from one of your cushiony jobs to take his case. What's the matter, is the big detective scared of the big, bad bear?"

"Lady," said Shayne looking at her tear-streaked face, "I don't even know Ferrall."

"That's right. Hide behind any excuse." She gritted her teeth. "You owe me. Whether you admit it or not, you owe me. And until Ferrall is made to pay, neither of us is going to get any sleep."

11:22. NOT MUCH LONGER. SHAYNE PULLED THE MARTELL out of the file cabinet by its neck. Foregoing a glass, he poured it directly down his throat. Maybe he could burn the ever-growing feeling in his gut.

SATURDAY EVENING THE STUFFED MARLIN WAS FULL. One of those "atmosphere" restaurants with the sights, sounds, and smells of the docks, it attracted a diverse crowd running the gamut from dock workers who wanted only to fill their stomachs with oysters and beer to socialites who desired to touch the wild side.

Shayne wasn't exactly sure why he had shown up, except that it wasn't for what the food critics called "ambience." Maybe it was to soothe his conscience, maybe it was to check on Mrs. Stuart, or maybe it was that something deep down told him Ferrall wasn't finished with the Stuarts.

"Haven't you caused me enough grief," said the small woman over the din of juke-box blues and beer bottles. "I told you I never wanted to see you again."

Shayne kicked aside some oyster shells in the aisle. "Mrs. Stuart, if you'd just let me talk with you."

"That's Widow Stuart, and there's nothing left to talk about. Stan's dead. We buried him yesterday. What more do you want?"

"Well, for starters I want to know if I can help in any way."

The orange-haired woman threw up her hands. "Will you listen to him," she said to nobody and everybody. "He stands by and lets some animal kill my Stan, then he shows up with blood on his hands and wants to know if he can help. Mr. Shayne, the only way you can help is by heading out that door and out of my life."

Just as the detective wheeled around to leave, he saw the saloon-type swinging doors burst open. Standing there, framed by the smoking lights around the entrance, was one of the biggest men he had ever seen. If possible, the figure covered the entire doorway. In an ill-fitting gray suit, the man reminded Shayne of one of those circus bears that the trainer dresses in clothing for comic effect.

But something told the detective this character wasn't here for laughs.

"Ferrall," hissed Mrs. Stuart. "I can't believe he's here, not tonight."

The bear lumbered toward them. About ten feet into the room, he had his path crossed by a careless patron. One arm the size of a railroad tie shot out, sending the tuxedoed figure to prematurely clean off a table filled with lobster and filet mignon.

The entire restaurant grew quiet as Ferrall's presence became known. A few diners slipped out the exit while others sat frozen in their hard-back chairs.

"Harry . . . Frank," yelled Mrs. Stuart.

Nothing happened.

"Get out here now, you jerks," the small woman screamed, her face beginning to flush almost the color of her hair. "Some bouncers," she said to Shayne. "Probably out back shooting craps."

A look at the brute in front of him told Shayne that Harry and Frank knew Ferrall was here and any crap associated with them was not a game.

The 6' 7" figure peered down at the tiny restaurant owner. "So sorry to hear about your husband, Mrs. Stuart. Stan was a good guy. A little headstrong, but a good guy." His hot breath smelled like day-old pizza.

"Get the hell outta here, Ferrall," said Mrs. Stuart. "Stan's hardly in the ground, and his killer shows up to dishonor his memory."

"Mrs. Stuart," said Ferrall, "you hurt me with such an accusation. Poor Stan was taken by a hit and run accident according to the police."

"But we know who caused that accident." The woman spat toward the hulking figure. "Now get out of my restaurant."

Ferrall's hand raised as if to strike out, but then he restrained himself. "Mrs. Stuart, I make allowances for your grief, seeing as there

was no witnesses willing to come forth and testify about what you claim. Police even checked my car and gave me a clean bill of health. Now, you and me have some unfinished business—the machines."

Shayne stepped between the two. "Mr. Ferrall, I believe the lady wants to sever any business ties with you."

"Who's this joker?" said Ferrall.

"Just a diner," said Mrs. Stuart.

"Well, friend," Ferrall growled, "you'd better get back to your clam chowder. Now, Mrs. Stuart, about those machines."

The detective stood his ground. "O.K., pal, time to leave."

Ferrall grabbed Shayne under the arms before the redhead could react. How could a man that huge be that quick? Shayne felt himself hurtling through the air. His breath momentarily left him as he thudded into a wall beneath a stuffed marlin.

Shayne looked up to see the behemoth pointing a baseball bat finger in his direction. "Stay out of my way, clown, or they'll be serving you as the main course tonight."

Ferrall reached out for Mrs. Stuart, who backed toward the bar.

The redhead reacted as fast as his damaged body would respond. He dragged himself from the floor and lunged toward Ferrall. With all his strength Shayne delivered a body block that would have made Don Shula applaud.

Both Ferrall and the detective tumbled into the bar, crushing a table in the process.

Shayne cocked his right. With every ounce of power he could muster, he drove his fist into Ferrall's jaw.

The giant's head whipped back with the force. But then to Shayne's amazement, Ferrall twisted back toward him with a demonic smile.

The punch hadn't fazed him.

Shayne stumbled to his feet and set himself. As Ferrall pulled his 280 plus pounds upward, the detective lashed out with a kick toward the hulk's chest.

Before the size twelve reached its target, Ferrall's meaty hand intercepted it. Shayne winced as the thug tightened his grip around the shin. Then with an upward motion Ferrall sent the redhead reeling into a group of startled patrons.

The detective had fought some formidable opponents in his career, but never had he encountered such brute strength combined with lightning reflexes.

Grabbing a chair, Shayne threw himself toward Ferrall. He swung the hardback only to see it shatter across the massive frame with no effect.

Before he could move, the bear cornered him against the bar. With laughter that seemed spawned in hell, the giant wrapped his arms around Shayne and lifted. The detective could feel the air escaping from his lungs as the grip tightened. The blood rushed to his head, and his ribs ached. His body couldn't take this pressure long without breaking.

Suddenly the hold loosened and Shayne dropped to the floor. Through glazed eyes he saw Ferrall above him.

"Stay out of my way, little man, or next time I'll finish the job."

SHAYNE BLINKED HIS TIRED EYES AT THE DISTANT CLOCK reading 11:26. Again he reached to the small of his back and withdrew the .38. He flipped open the cylinder and checked. Six shells nestled snugly in their chambers. He set the gun on the desk in front of him. Its grip was damp. He looked at his right palm, then wiped both with a handkerchief. What was it that had drawn him to Will Gentry's office that rainy day to start digging into Ferrall's life?

MIAMI'S CHIEF OF POLICE SHIFTED HIS BLACK CIGAR from one side of his mouth to the other. "Mike, there's a xerox on the desk over there by the door. You know I can't give you official police documents, but if you should pick up a piece of paper just lying round, well, who could stop that?"

"Thanks, Will." Shayne smiled. "I know what I asked for put you in a bind."

"So you're on the Stuart case?"

"I finally decided to give it my best shot."

"You know my men checked and couldn't line up any witnesses or hard evidence?"

"Yeah."

"Watch yourself. Saying Ferrall's bad news is like saying the '73 Dolphins at 17-0 did O.K."

"Everybody's singing the same song about Ferrall."

The police chief blew a cloud of white smoke into the heavy air. "That creep leads the league in intimidations per case. A dozen times we've had him dead to rights, and a dozen times just before the trial something happened to change the key witness's mind."

"Like what?"

"One guy set a new high-dive record—from the top of the Fontainbleau. Others have backed out of the witness chair after close consultation."

"With their lawyers?"

"With their plastic surgeons."

"How does Ferrall get away with it?"

"That's what I keep asking myself, and the only answer I can come up with is this. The snail-darters of the world have become extinct, but the great whites survive because their one goal in life is to kill. I don't even think Ferrall takes any pleasure in what he does—he just does it."

"A survivor."

"His kind will outlive you and me, Mike. They always have because they do whatever it takes. Worst of all, they have no moral scruples to tie them down."

"What causes a man to divorce himself from humanity, Will?"

"Sometimes humanity lends a helping hand. Ferrall and his twin sister are from a broken home. The father was kicked out of Cuba when Castro came to power. Set up shop in Miami running everything from rum to señoritas. From all I can tell, he was filth. And the mother wasn't much better. If you were being kind, you'd call her a hostess at one of Senor Ferrall's clubs before he married her.

"Not your south-of-the-border Ozzie and Harriet."

"It gets worse," said Gentry. "One day Harriet gets tired of Ozzie's nightly fifth and her nightly beating. She empties a .22 into Ozzie's gut. A pound heavier, Ozzie still manages to slice her up like lean bacon before he has the common decency to die."

Shayne cleared his throat. "That's quite a story."

"Yeah," said the cop, "and I left out the best part. Guess what fourteen-year-old set of twins watched the whole thing through a cracked door?"

Shayne walked over to the air conditioner and let it blow on him full force. "My God."

"And that was the beginning of an illustrious career. Running numbers, protection, dope, club fighting—all before he reached eighteen. Finally a judge gave him an ultimatum—jail or the army."

"He chose Uncle Sam?"

"Not for very long. It seems Ferrall traded the Miami lockup for a stockade in Saigon. The guy logged more days behind bars than an M-16. Got himself a dishonorable discharge."

"Then he came back here?"

"Yeah. And he was in great demand. If the army didn't teach him anything else, at least they succeeded in teaching him to kill effectively."

"It says here," said Shayne, scanning the xerox, "that he trained in Demolitions."

"That way he could kill more people at the same time," said Gentry

cynically. "No, don't underestimate Ferrall—he's no fool."

"Where did he start out in the underworld?"

"That's just it," said Gentry. "He became an entrepreneur. Went into business with, of all people, his sister. She was the brains in the family. Got a degree from Georgia Tech. Is supposed to be some kind of electronics wizard. She builds those video gambling devices, and he strongarms them on merchants."

"Blood is thicker."

"You got it. And do you know where blood is the thickest, Mike?"

"Where?"

"When it's lying on the ground, starting to congeal, after running out of a lifeless body."

11:30. WHERE DID THE FAULT LIE? WAS FERRALL'S LIFE just the unfortunate byproduct that resulted from the mating of two of life's degenerates? No, that was a crock of sociological B.S. What did the eggheads and the shrinks call it? "Biological Determinism." Well, maybe that theoretical crap worked in the classrooms, but it was garbage on the streets.

Yeah, Ferrall had been dealt a rotten hand, but so had a lot of people who hadn't turned out cruds. The way the redhead figured it, the bottom line was you had to take responsibility for what you did. Dammit! That was the problem with a no-fault society. No-fault insurance, no-fault divorce, insanity pleas, extenuating circumstances, "The Devil made me do it!" The guy was right who said what this country needs is a heavy dose of guilt.

Hell, that day he had walked into Gentry's office he was carrying enough of that type baggage to keep a crew of bellboys busy a year.

Sure, he knew he wasn't Mike Shayne, Protector of Every Victim, Champion of Every Cause. Hell, he had trouble just keeping even. He knew, yeah, he knew he wasn't liable for the death of Stan Stuart, legally or otherwise, but that couldn't turn off that wide-open spigot dripping acid into his gut. Maybe, though, he could have taken on just one more case. After all, she had come for his help, and he had turned her away.

That was probably what had kept him here so late. The phone call Lucy had taken earlier in the day. The call that begged him to be in his office tonight.

"She hung up, Michael," said Lucy. "I didn't even have time to get her name. She said she couldn't talk now, but promised to call back late tonight. I know this sounds trite, but she said it was a matter of life and death."

HE'D TAKEN A LOT MORE PHONE CALLS LATELY AND worked a lot more weekends too. 11:45. Shayne paced between his office and Lucy's. Sometimes he stared at the bullet holes in the wall behind his secretary's desk where Lady Brett Barnes had fired at him. The window he had talked Juan Hernandez from jumping out of. The framed patch given him by Alpha Squad. His license.

Memories. The office was held together by them. Why was it he never had paused before to relive, to reminisce about meaningful times, both good and bad? After all, they were such a key part of his life.

Life, that was it. Sure, his life had been a hard one, but it had also been full. And, hell, he wasn't ready to leave it yet. He wouldn't succumb to that crouching fear in his gut—no matter how hotly Ferrall's last words to him burned in his mind.

THE CLEAN-SHAVEN ASSISTANT DISTRICT ATTORNEY leaned over the witness chair. "Let me get this absolutely clear, Mr. Shayne. You investigated the defendant's life closely for nearly six weeks."

"I did."

"Did you as a result of this investigation uncover evidence linking John Ferrall with the death of Stanley Stuart?"

"Yes."

The young prosecutor carefully linked the redhead's eyewitness testimony, the notebook in Ferrall's handwriting, the witnesses the detective had found who placed the Lincoln registered to Ferrall at the scene of the hit and run, the bloody bumper in the junkyard, and the testimony of the mechanic who changed the bumper the day after Stuart's death.

As the noose tightened, Shayne's steel-gray eyes never strayed from Ferrall. The defendant stared across the courtroom like a grizzly in a cage. The redhead was proud of the look on his own face that said, "Sorry, pal, but here's one witness who's not going to change his mind."

The jury's verdict was swift. Guilty of Murder One.

Ferrall's blonde twin screamed "No" from the back of the courtroom as the verdict was delivered, then collapsed.

Despite the manacles on his hands and feet, it took three bailiffs and two Metro cops to drag Ferrall from his seat. Suddenly he broke free. Stopping in front of the railing that separated him from the redhead, the convicted killer snarled, "July 24th. My birthday, your Deathday."

SHAYNE DIDN'T HAVE TO GLANCE AT LUCY'S CALENDAR

to know what it read. 24 July. The wall clock told him Deathday had less than twelve minutes remaining.

The redhead continued to stare at the time. He'd have made book that the urgent life-and-death phone call Lucy had received was designed to be sure he stayed in his office that night.

But why the office? In the streets he'd have been a much more vulnerable target.

11:51. His office was his home turf. His advantage. There was only one door into the office . . . unless Farrell didn't plan to enter that way.

From the window came a noise.

Shayne crossed the room in a few quick strides, his mind recognizing what he heard was the unmistakeable echo of a shot.

Below, a macabre scene bathed in an eerie yellow glow played itself out. As street people stood frozen, a huge figure moved slowly toward a small, orange-haired woman who fired one shot after another into the advancing giant.

The figure the redhead had caught a glimpse of earlier he now knew was a thinner version of Mrs. Stuart. Like everyone else in the crowded courtroom, she had heard Ferrall's threat. Obviously used to dealing with him, she had taken the threat seriously and had waited for the escaped convict to come to the detective. Now two years of grief and hatred had been released in the form of six shots from a small-caliber pistol.

But the bullets seemed to have had little effect on their target. Staggering from side to side Ferrall threw himself at the woman who stood defiantly awaiting her fate. He grabbed her in his paws and lifted. Her involuntary screams were cut short by the loss of breath.

Shayne, almost able to feel the bear-like arms tighten around his own body, stood as helpless as a theatre-goer. His .38 was still on his desk. There was no way he could get a clear shot from the window. Too dark, too many people, and too much chance of hitting her.

With a final jerk Ferrall snapped the life from the frail woman. Both fell to the concrete.

Even amidst the carnage outside, a heavy weight fell from the detective as well. He felt the muscles in his body relax as they always did after a period of lengthy stress. It was over. That night that had so preoccupied his thoughts for months was over.

Ferrall had been right—July 24th had been a deathday.

But something in the back of the detective's head wouldn't let him totally relax. Something wasn't right. Though the pieces fit, some had been left over.

Quickly he turned from the open window and headed across the office. 11:55. Why hadn't he thought of it before?

His path was cut short by the ring of the phone. Was this too part of the plan?

Grabbing up the receiver, he said, "Shayne."

"Oh, Michael," came the honey-dipped voice of his secretary, "I'm sorry about tonight. I totally forgot about that phone call you were waiting for. I feel so stupid to have been so . . ."

"Lucy," interrupted the redhead, "tell me again where you got that clock for the office."

11:56.

"Now, Michael, we've already been through . . ."

"Hurry, Lucy. Where?"

"Down the block, like I told you."

"From whom?"

"A nice young lady. She almost forced it on me. You know I got it for a song. But why?"

Shayne didn't have time for etiquette. He slammed down the receiver and raced for the outer office. How could he have missed it? A promised urgent phone call to keep him in the office, a clock conveniently pushed on Lucy by a young woman—probably a blonde, Ferrall being an explosives expert, and his sister an electronics wizard. No wonder Ferrall could set a date to snuff out a never-say-die detective. Even if Ferrall hadn't been able to escape on schedule, an accomplice could detonate the device. No wonder no worry about assaulting the office.

11:57.

Shayne reached the clock. Jerking it from the wall, he pried the back from its frame.

The inside surprised him.

Nothing.

Again he inspected it.

Again, no electronic device, no plastique.

But he had been so sure. It all fit.

"Pull yourself together, Mike," he uttered under his breath." It's over. Quit imagining things.

Shayne leaned the clock against the faded wall. It was time to get down to the street and ready himself for the inevitable questions from the cops. Sirens in the distance hinted of things to come.

11:58. The longest night of his life was really over, he told himself. A little Martell, a steaming-hot shower, and finally sleep. He slung on his coat and opened the office door to go home.

Standing in the hallway was Johnny Ferrall's twin sister. In her hands was something he might have expected from her late brother—a pump-model, sawed-off shotgun.

"BACK IN SLOWLY, SHAYNE." SHE JABBED THE BLUE steel at him like a pitchfork. "We've got less than two minutes to go till 12:00. A little time to kill, you might say."

As the redhead retreated into the outer office, he reflected on her coldness, her callousness. She must have been waiting outside his office and she had to have seen her brother die in a pool of his own blood, yet she seemed as emotionless as one of her machines.

The detective knew he should have seen it. If the combination of blood and environment could combine to produce one animal, why not two?

"I'll bet you made that urgent phone call this afternoon," he said, continuing to back slowly into his private office.

"Of course I did. How else were we going to be sure you'd be here?"

"Why my office?"

"What better place to kill you, the place from which all your cases originate. The best reason? Gee, I'd love to see your secretary's pretty face tomorrow morning when she finds the office has been redecorated with pieces of her former employer. It'll take a week for the cops to scrape what's left of you off the walls and haul you away in garbage bags."

Shayne's retreat was halted by his wooden desk. "Why 12:00?"

"Tell me, Shayne, how many gallons have you sweated out waiting for Johnny? And didn't you feel great when you thought it was over. That almost makes Johnny's death worth it, knowing you had a false sense of relief."

"You mean the two of you were going to burst in here right at midnight?"

"That was the plan."

Five feet from him, pausing in the office doorway, she leveled the .12-gauge at his groin. "As dear Daddy used to say just before he erased a competitor, 'Adios Amigo'."

The noise was loud.

She wheeled around. The shotgun roared. She pumped again. The wall exploded.

She turned back to Shayne.

In the split-second the clock loudly striking midnight had diverted her attention, the redhead's hand had found the Smith & Wesson he had left on his desk.

The first bullet cored into her forehead.

The shotgun opened a gaping hole in the ceiling.

His second shot knocked her through the doorway and back into the unupholstered couch.

With the shotgun in her lap, she seemed an obscene parody of a client awaiting an appointment.

Shayne's arm dropped to his side, and he started toward her.

Like a primal reptile whose reflexes cause it to strike even after death, her arms vibrated the gun toward an upright position.

The .38 recoiled in succession four times. With a Ferrall the rawboned redhead had learned not to take chances.

Wiping the sweat from his forehead, Shayne glanced around the shambled room. Lucy had been right about the clock being a lot like him.

Amidst the shards of glass, the chips of wood, and the fragments of flesh and bone, the damned thing was still ticking. ●

MYSTERY MINIQUIZ

What do actors William Gargan, Lee Tracy, Lloyd Nolan and Mark Stevens have in common?

They all played Martin Kane, Private Eye.

World War I spy Gertrude Margarete Zelle was better known by what name?

Executed by the French in 1917, she was known as Mata Hari.

In the movie *Goldfinger* how many seconds were left until the A-bomb in Ft. Knox was to explode when it was shut off?

Time remaining on the counter was 007 seconds.

The girl was sprawled, naked, over the rough planking of a lakeside wharf, her once nubile body limp and lifeless. Her eyes were open wide with horror, her mouth twisted in a silent scream. The marks on her body suggested that a giant worm had wrapped itself around the girl—and squeezed!

The Ogopogo Affair

by MEL D. AMES

STUART BLAZE STEERED THE SLEEK BLACK VAN INTO A parking slot in front of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police building in the old north-end district of Kelowna. They had driven all night to get to this small jewel of a city, nestled midway along the eastern shore of Okanagan Lake, in the heart of beautiful British Columbia. A glance at his watch told Blaze it was a few minutes shy of 6:30. He was right on time.

Even at so early an hour, through the van's tinted windshield, Blaze could feel the heat of the Okanagan sun as it rose to its summer's task of ripening fruit and tanning the tender skins of tourists. In late July, the bright cloudless blue sky was a fairly predictable phenomenon; Stu Blaze being there to witness it, however, was not. *A rather bizarre case*, the inspector had implied by long-distance telephone, *something about a lake monster killing off the tourists*. Blaze shrugged inwardly. Old John had finally flipped.

Before leaving the vehicle, he drew the curtain behind the cab and smiled down at the sleeping form of Connie Wells, girl-Friday and new, self-appointed travel companion. She was curled up on the built-in, let-down bunk, half in and half out of the covers, looking more like an innocent waif than the duty-toughened ex-policewoman she really was.

It had been a tiring trip over the Canadian Rockies. They had left Calgary late Monday evening with Connie driving, then, somewhere between the sleepy mountain towns of Golden and Revelstoke, she had given up the wheel to Blaze and crawled into the back for a little shut-eye. He decided to let her sleep herself out.

BLAZE LOCKED THE DOOR AS HE LEFT THE VAN, THEN made for the entrance to the squat Administration building. He was a big man, Stuart Blaze, six-four, with a thick bull-like neck and massive shoulders. His short-cut, wiry blonde hair glistened like a Brillo pad in the morning sun. He walked tall and proud, with a confidence that came of knowing precisely where he stood in a world of conflict between good and evil men. Twenty years on the Force will add a certain style and stature to a dedicated man.

A pretty receptionist looked up with a smile from behind the front counter. A small sign told Blaze her name was Jan Thurston, a civilian employee.

"Inspector Warfield is expecting me," he said to her, returning the smile.

"Oh, yes." The girl referred to an open date book. "You must be Sergeant Blaze."

"*Mr. Blaze, now.*"

"Yes, well—come right in, *Mr. Blaze.*" Her smile broadened. She pressed a buzzer that released the automatic lock on the door to the inner offices, then pointed a dainty finger. "It's the first office on the left."

Blaze had barely stepped inside when a tall, gray-haired man with deeply chiseled features shoved his head out of an office doorway. "Stu! I thought I heard you come in. Damn it, man, it's been a long time."

The men shook hands warmly.

"You look as obscenely fit as ever, you old rascal." The inspector drew the big ex-Mountie into the office and closed the door. He motioned Blaze to a chair, then settled himself comfortably behind his desk. "Your new career as a P.I. must agree with you," he said approvingly.

Blaze flushed with modest pride. "Thanks to referrals from the

Force, John, it's been going well."

Inspector John Warfield made a steeple with his fingers, pursed his thin lips against it and squinted his pale gray eyes. "The grapevine has it that young Connie Wells, from the Calgary Detachment, took her 'purchase' a few weeks ago, just so she could go to work full-time for you, Stu. That a fact?"

Blaze flushed a little deeper. He had been expecting this. At the time, he had been vehemently opposed to what he felt was an impetuous move by Connie to "buy her way" out of the R.C.M.P. She had been one of the original Troop 17, of 1974, the first group of women ever to enter Force. She had over nine years under her Sam Browne when she made the big decision to walk away from it all. It wasn't something that she, or he, had taken lightly. But it was done, and he didn't particularly want to talk about it now.

"Yeah, Connie's with me," he said quietly. "It was her choice, John. She's of age."

"No need to be defensive about it, Stu. Knowing you, you probably did your best to talk her out of it. I just wanted to get my facts straight. That's all."

"Okay, John, so now you've got it straight." Blaze shifted uncomfortably in his chair. "What have you got lined up for me this morning?" he asked, eager to change the subject. "You sounded desperate on the phone."

"I am desperate, Stu. We've got ourselves a P.R. problem you wouldn't believe. I was sent in from Vancouver to try to get a handle on it. Ever hear of Ogopogo?"

"Ogo—who?"

"Ogopogo," the inspector said again. "and it's a 'what,' not a 'who'—a legendary lake monster, is what it is, and a long-time inhabitant of Okanagan Lake." He leaned forward over his desk and his voice became quietly retrospective. "A long snaky thing, Stu, over twenty feet long, they tell me, with, uh—a horse or goat-like head."

Blaze seemed undecided whether to grin, groan, or keep looking serious. "You're putting me on," he said finally.

John Warfield wasn't smiling. "This is not a put-on, Stu. Ogopogo has long been a household word from one end of the Okanagan Valley to the other, *and*, points far afield. There have been well over twenty recorded sightings, dating from as far back as 1852, involving scores of reliable eyewitnesses. Even prior to that, he (she)—*it*, was well known to the local Indians as *N'Ha-a-itk*. According to legend, they, the Indians, used to throw sacrificial animals into the lake to appease the monster. Small pigs, chickens, things like that."

Blaze cleared his throat. "John, if you're about to tell me they're keeping Ogopogo happy now by feeding it the odd tourist—"

"That's Ogopogo, Stu, not—what you said. And stop trying to second-guess me. It isn't the tourists that are hurting, it's the tourist trade. Not to mention three dead Indians. Let me explain."

"I wish you would." Blaze reached for a cigarette. "My business cards read P.I., John—remember?—not P.R."

John Warfield drew his lips together in a thin white line. He leaned back in his swivel chair, his hands still planted firmly on the desk. He was a striking man, even out of uniform. His age could have been anywhere between forty and sixty, in spite of the gray hair. "Stu," he said with deadly calm, "just shut up and listen, will you?"

Blaze shrugged his mountainous shoulders and drew heavily on the cigarette. "It's your powwow," he said. A puff of blue smoke emerged from his mouth with each word.

Warfield, glaring, suddenly gave a reluctant chuckle. "You look like you're sending up smoke signals," he said. His gray eyes glinted mischievously. "I wonder if that isn't some kind of omen—?"

"John, come *o-o-on*. All you've given me so far is a lot of hocus-pocus. Lake monster, Indian superstitions, pigs, chickens, smoke signals—"

"You're forgetting three dead Indians."

Blaze heaved a sigh. "If only I could."

The inspector got to his feet then, and began to pace. "Okay, okay. I was just giving you some background, Stu, because what I'm about to tell you is going to sound, well—a little farfetched. All I ask is that you hear me out before you start jumping to conclusions."

Blaze sent up three more signals. "You got it," he said.

"THREE WEEKS AGO LAST FRIDAY," WARFIELD BEGAN, "an early morning jogger was crossing Okanagan Lake bridge when he stopped to catch his breath and admire the view. Something in the water caught his eye. He'd heard about Ogopogo, of course, so he moved farther along the bridge, hoping to get a better look. When the thing in the water was directly beneath him, he recognized it as a human body, floating just below the surface—"

"One dead Indian," Blaze speculated wryly.

"Right. It was a girl, Stu, mid teens. She was nude. At first, it was thought she had drowned, but the autopsy revealed otherwise."

"She'd been murdered?"

"She'd been *sacrificed*, Stu, crushed to death in the coils of the lake monster, Ogopogo."

Blaze groaned aloud. "John," he pleaded, "you've just got to be kidding."

The inspector leaned over his desk and yanked open the center drawer. He took out a brown manilla folder and plunked it down in front of Blaze. "I had Ghost put this together for you. It covers everything, from the moment the jogger discovered the body."

Ghost, Blaze knew, was Warfield's aide-de-camp, Sergeant Gary Goetze. He was known throughout the Force for his uncanny ability to eke out the most unlikely facts and figures on anyone and anything. The epithet was apt. Goetze had the soul of a computer and the gray physical deportment of a living ghost.

"I don't much like being taken for granted," Blaze grunted, "even by you and Ghost." He placed a restraining hand the size of a twenty ounce T-bone on the unopened file. "And why, may I ask, is this job being routed to me?"

John Warfield lowered himself back into his swivel chair. "Open the file," he said.

Blaze flipped back the brown cover and was visibly shaken. He found himself staring down at an enlarged colored glossy of a teen-aged Indian girl. She was sprawled, naked, over the rough planking of a lakeside wharf or pier, her once nubile body limp and lifeless, weirdly contorted. The bow of the police boat was fuzzy but discernible in the immediate background. The girl's eyes were open, wide with apparent horror; the mouth twisted in a silent scream.

The big ex-Mountie had seen death before. It was never pleasant. But what made this one unique, was a long purple bruise, the width of a man's arm, that circled the body in a continuous, unbroken spiral from the neck to the knees. It was as though a giant worm had wrapped itself around the girl—and squeezed.

"Mother of God!" Blaze's gaze drifted incredulously from the girl to Warfield, then back to the girl. "I don't believe what I'm seeing."

"Then maybe you'll believe the next item in the file. It's the autopsy report."

Blaze turned the page.

"According to the Medical Examiner," Warfield told him as he read, "that girl was crushed, *literally crushed*; ribs snapped like matchsticks, shoulder and hip joints torn from their sockets, the pelvis split and crumpled—it's all in there, Stu. But the most unnerving thing of all, as I see it, is that the internal havoc in that girl's body, is irrefutably consistent with the path of that long spiral bruise."

Blaze inhaled deeply as he browsed through the remaining file. "What other goodies have you got in here?"

"Two other girls. One about seventeen, one fourteen. Both Indians. They were found in the same general vicinity of the bridge, precisely a week apart. All three girls were pulled from the water nude, and to date, no trace of their clothing has been found. And, as you can see, they all had met the same grisly end."

"Were the girls molested?"

"No."

"Sexually, I mean."

"No."

"Drugs?"

"All our tests have come up negative, Stu. We just don't know what to look for."

"No leads at all? Other than the Ogopogo thing?"

"None. But what other explanation could there possibly be? We're not only faced with an old Indian myth, remember; we're dealing here with hard medical evidence."

"How many people know about this?"

"We've managed to keep all three deaths under local wraps, so to speak, until yesterday. Then the national media got wind of them. The whole mess was aired on the News Hour, last night, so I guess Canada A.M. will be picking it up this morning. You got a TV built into that wheeled ark of yours?"

"Affirmative, but I doubt that Canada A.M. will tell us anything that Ghost hasn't dug up already." Blaze levered himself out of his chair with a beleaguered sigh. He scooped up the file and headed for the door without a backward glance.

Warfield followed. "I knew I could count on you, Stu. Ghost will catch up with you later. He'll be your liaison with this office."

Blaze turned at the threshold. "I haven't yet said I'd take the case, John. Let me give it some thought, kick it around with Connie—" He shook his blond, bristly head. "I'll get back to you."

Warfield fought a knowing smile. He knew from past performance that once Stuart Blaze picked up a scent, he was the personification of Krazy Glue itself. In true Mountie tradition, it had never been, and would not be now, a question of *would* he get his man (or, in this case, lake monster); it was merely a matter of *when*.

BLAZE CAUGHT A WHIFF OF FRESHLY BREWED COFFEE BEFORE he got to within ten feet of the van. The door opened for him magically as he approached, and as he ducked into the cab, he found himself on the receiving end of a morning kiss, amid the sensuous sounds and smells of sizzling bacon.

"Morning, boss." Connie Wells' smiling face glowed at him with the radiance of a morning sun. Her eyes had the color and sparkle of Creme-de-Menthe. She stood slim and trim in white cords and a matching shirt-blouse, a full foot shorter than his own seventy-six inches. Her abundant auburn hair, which she had decided to let grow after leaving the Force, still just barely brushed her collar. She put Blaze in mind of the bushy-tailed nymph in the Kellogg Special K commercials; the epitome of everything bright and beautiful.

"Morning, slave." he stifled a yawn. "I thought this domestic routine was strictly taboo in the new feminist manifesto."

She handed him a cup of coffee. "I'm only a feminist when it pleases me," she said with a perverse, saccharine smile. "One egg, or two?"

"Three." Blaze took a swallow of coffee and settled back comfortably on the leather settee-cum-bunk that ran down one side of the van. A small, open-up galley occupied the immediate corner and a color TV hung on a swivel from the headliner. Connie had already set a swing-out table with breakfast accouterments.

"I don't feel good about this case," he told her as she flipped an egg. "I'm used to hunting down criminals, not an overgrown worm with a head like a goat."

Connie did a double-take. "10-9, please."

Blaze chuckled. It took time to shake the habit of the R.C.M.P. codes. *10-9; repeat please.* He reached up to the TV set.

"It's time for Canada A.M.," he said. "They're supposed to have the whole story this morning. Suppose we listen to their version while we eat, then if there's anything they've missed, I'll fill you in later."

"Whatever you say, lover."

Blaze glanced up at her with a look of mild concern. "Fellow officer, I was," he told her quietly. "Boss, I try to be. Dear and devoted friend, I truly am. But lover, Connie? That just hasn't happened."

"Through no fault of mine," she said without embarrassment.

Blaze hunkered down against the leather cushions and loosed a long troubling sigh. "I'm just not the guy for you, Connie. I'm in my forty-first year, remember? You don't want to mess around with a big old lug like me. You're still young, you're beautiful—"

Connie turned her head and looked at him from atop a body that any teen-ager would have been proud of. "I'm thirty-one, Stu, and that's no spring chicken. And the only time I feel really beautiful is when *you* look at me." She plunked a heaping plate of bacon and eggs on the table in front of him. "You big jerk," she scowled, "how'm I ever going to get you to say 'Uncle?'"

Blaze knew, of course, just as surely as she did, that he had already

said "Uncle" in his heart. She sat beside him with a smaller portion of the same breakfast, and he responded with charitable aplomb to a dig in the ribs for more elbow room. The final abdication of one's bachelorhood was not an easy thing for a man to accept, irrespective of the bribe.

MIDMORNING SAW BLAZE AND CONNIE STROLLING OUT onto the mile-long, floating, Okanagan Lake bridge (the only one of its kind in Canada, they had just been told) to see at first hand the area where the bodies had surfaced. Their guide, a young constable who was obviously enjoying a respite from the traffic duty, had been peripherally involved in all three recoveries.

"That's Hot Sands Beach," he said, pointing back to where Kelowna's City Park met the lake edge, "the park is behind it, of course, and beyond that, the yacht club. You can see the masts of the sailboats poking up above the wharf. The girls' bodies were all spotted on this side of the bridge, the north side, between the lift span and the shoreline."

"Is there any current down there?" Blaze asked leaning over the rail.

"Current? This is a lake, Mr. Blaze, not a river, although it is almost a hundred miles long and no more than three miles across at any point. The entire valley is a veritable Mecca for tourists, especially during the summer months."

"Hot Sands Beach is almost deserted," Connie noted in contradiction.

"Yes, mam." The constable chuckled grimly. "And it'll likely stay that way until someone snares the now infamous Ogopogo. Did you know there's a million dollars offered to anyone who catches the creature?"

"*A million dollars?*" Connie's vivid green eyes widened in amazement. "Who'd put up that kind of money?"

"The OSTA, I think. That's the Okanagan-Similkameen Tourist Association. Or was it the local Chamber of Commerce? Anyway, the million bucks has now been underwritten by Lloyds of London (can you believe it?), and was even mentioned in the House of Commons, in Ottawa, by the local MP. See that building?" The constable indicated a small, squat structure at the west end of the bridge. "That's the Tourist INFO Center. They've apparently got some guy in there (a volunteer, I think) who's been pretty vocal about this whole thing. A retired fire chief, they tell me, by the name of Roland Rocque."

"Roll and Rock?"

The young Mountie spelled it out. "R-O-C-Q-U-E, pronounced

rock, as in stone. His first name is Roland. He claims *N'Ha-a-itk* is on the warpath again."

Blaze shrugged his shaggy eyebrows and turned his attention back to the shimmering surface of the lake. "What has been the general public reaction to the drownings, constable?"

"Panic, what else? And they weren't drownings, Mr. Blaze."

"Whatever."

"Well—most people seem to figure the girls must have been skinny-dipping off Hot Sands, and, I guess, that sometime during the night—"

"Alone? Skinny-dipping alone?"

The constable shrugged his epaulets. "Who's to know, sir, what an Indian's going to do?"

Blaze winced inwardly. "Then what became of their clothing?"

"Your guess is as good as mine, Mr. Blaze. Maybe their clothes were stolen. There are a lot of itinerant fruit pickers roaming the valley this time of year."

"I understand all three bodies were found on a Friday morning, constable. Subsequent Fridays."

"Yes. And as near as the M.E. could tell, they'd been in the water anywhere between five to eight hours."

Blaze stared off down the lake. "They're in cahoots," he said absently, as much to himself as anyone.

"Who?" Connie asked.

"The Indians and *N'Ha-a-itk*. They seem to be on the same timetable."

"Maybe it's the grim aftermath of some kind of on-going Indian ritual," Connie said at his elbow.

"Maybe, maybe not." Blaze sighed heavily. "The more we get into this case, the curioser it gets."

Connie echoed him, sigh and sound. "Curioser and curioser," she said.

INSTEAD OF FOLLOWING THE CAUSEWAY BACK TO THE city center, where the van was parked, Blaze and Connie left the constable at the east end of the bridge to amble down along the near deserted beach. Only two other pertinacious souls marred the long and otherwise empty expanse of sand. Blaze halted by a driftwood log that lay, partially submerged, nudging the sandy shore. He hefted one end, then gave it a gentle shove with his toe.

"That could be a navigational hazard," Connie admonished as the log wallowed out into deeper water.

"I guess it's just a question of priorities," Blaze replied cryptically.

"I don't follow."

"According to the constable," he reminded her, "the girls entered the water just about at this point, then floated around for five to eight hours until they were spotted—*still* in this same general area. I'd like to see if the same thing happens to this log. You'll notice it's roughly the same size and weight as the victims."

"Hmm. That bloodhound brain of yours never quits. And here I thought you were just enjoying our little stroll."

Blaze turned to smile at her. "I am," he assured her, but his eyes looked as fathomless as the lake.

They cut through the park then, skirting the busy sports oval and the tennis courts, lured on through the trees by the distant glimpse of a gala-looking old paddle-wheeler. It was the *Fintray Queen*, moored near the park's north entrance, where it vied for tourist attention with a billowing sculptured fountain, entitled *Sails*, and a twenty-foot mock-up of a horse-headed, spiny-backed, green-and-yellow replica of Ogopogo.

They paused there, to sit on the concrete lip of the fountain, where they could quietly ponder the malevolent creature that was terrorizing this small interior city. As they watched, a bikini-clad, blonde, teen-age girl began to pose for a camera-toting cohort. With one shapely thigh wedged into the monster's gaping jaw, she contorted her sweet young face into a grim, comical mask of mock horror.

Connie chuckled nervously. "Not everyone, it seems, is fraught with fear."

"Would you be, at that age?"

Before Connie could respond, a man seemed suddenly to materialize in front of her, as though from nowhere. He moved soundlessly to her side and settled down, uninvited, like a puff of gray morning mist.

"Hi, Ghost," Blaze and Connie said in unison.

"Stu. Connie. You both look great."

Sergeant Gary Goetze had a voice that was as gray and weightless as his appearance. His face and his hands were the color of cigarette ash, his thinning hair a diluted, pallid grizzle. You had to get close to him to make out the faint, dusty curve of his eyebrows, and the eyes that peered hauntingly out from under them were the same smoky, ethereal gray as the rest of him. Even the plain-clothes he wore were nondescript and colorless. The nickname, Ghost, suited him well.

"You look great, too," Blaze heard Connie say, knowing she couldn't possibly be serious.

"Feel fine," Ghost said, "but I don't much care for this infernal Okanagan weather. It's been up in the high nineties for over a week

now. I'm talking Fahrenheit, you understand. You can convert it to Celsius, yourself, if that's your bag. I'm too damn old to change."

Blaze laughed. The current controversy over the Liberal government's unpopular conversion to metric was rampant, especially in the west. "What have you got for me, Ghost? An update on the file?"

"That file doesn't need an update, Stu, it needs a match. Have you ever run into anything so weird?"

"Never."

"Any ideas on how they died?"

"You're not buying the Ogopogo theory?"

Ghost treated them to a sinister grimace that Connie was sure had begun with every good intention of becoming a smile. "What do I know? I still believe in Rin-tin-tin." He reached into an inner pocket of his jacket and extracted a garish, multicolored handbill. "The circus is in town," he told them in his bland monotone. "It's pegged out along the main drag, Harvey Street, in that open field between the Spall Plaza and Orchard Park Shopping Center. You might just be interested."

"In a circus?"

"They usually only set up a few rides for the kids," Ghost persisted, "and stay over for two or three days, but this time they've got a bit of a midway and a couple of side-shows. One of the latter is run by a guy by the name of Kurt Meyerbaum. He's been dragging them in for over three weeks now, with an endearing little critter he calls Cedric."

"So?"

Connie cringed as Ghost leaned across in front of her to confide in a tooth-baring, Bela Lugosi whisper against his palm, "Cedric is a twenty-two foot python."

Blaze narrowed his eyes at the grinning Ghost across the brink of Connie's startled profile. "That's a pig in a poke if I ever heard one," he snarled.

"Who said anything about a pig? I *said*—"

"I know what you said," Blaze muttered, "and it's just too damn convenient to have the slightest relevance. I suppose this guy Meyerbaum also hates Indians—"

"You got it."

"And he takes Cedric for a swim every Thursday night after the last show—"

Ghost rose to his feet like a column of gray smoke. "You got a phone in that home-away-from-home?"

Blaze drew a card from his lapel pocket. It read, simply: PRIVATE INVESTIGATIONS, Stuart Blaze. The radio-telephone call numbers

were inscribed in the bottom right-hand corner, "If we're not in," he said, "a tape will pick up a message."

Connie stood, then turned and stooped to retrieve her purse from beside the fountain. When she straightened a moment later, Ghost was gone.

"Where'd he go?" she said in mild awe.

Blaze, who had been momentarily distracted by the aesthetics of Connie's last maneuver, did a quick three-sixty.

"Sonofagun," he said with a grin. "He must work at that."

THEY HEARD THE CALLIOPEAN SOUNDS OF THE CIRCUS from half a mile away. The whirling glitter of the rides came into view next, and the smell of French fries and cotton candy assailed their nostrils before they had reached the turnstiles. It only remained then, to taste and touch, for all five senses to be blatantly seduced.

Blaze headed directly for the midway with Connie skipping along at his side, hanging onto his sleeve, taking two steps to his giant one.

"For something that isn't going to have the slightest relevance," she puffed, "you're sure in an unholy hurry to get to it."

Blaze's only response was to increase his pace. But on reaching the crowded midway, he braked suddenly, and Connie piled into him with a startled "*Ooof!*" As she inspected her nose for damage, Blaze pointed triumphantly to an illuminated marquee that proclaimed in flashing, multi-colored lights: CEDRIC—THE LARGEST REPTILE IN CAPTIVITY. And underneath, in more modest terms: *Handler, Kurt Meyerbaum*.

"I hate snakes," Connie asserted as she squeezed around a locked turnstile, hard on the heels of Blaze, then on through a door that ordered them with mute futility to KEEP OUT.

"Then you'd better watch where you step," Blaze cautioned grinning as Connie groaned with new dismay.

Inside, Meyerbaum's canvas emporium was structured in the way of an old Shakespearean theatre, with encircling benches, converging down on a sunken central stage. The tent was dimly lit and empty, except for a huge glass enclosure that dominated the stage, and, hopefully, gave secure domicile to all twenty-two slithery feet of "the largest reptile in captivity."

As they neared the stage, they could make out the snake's indolent bulk, stretching from one end of its glass prison to the other, its scaly hide etched in diamond-like markings and imbued with earthy hues of brown, yellow, and muddy black. There was a subtle sense of movement to the inert body, an almost imperceptible inner pulse that

seemed to ripple along its monstrous length and gather in a restless lump, a foot or two down from the flat leathery head.

"You know what that lump is?" Blaze asked with the unlikely innocence of an angler baiting a barbed hook.

Connie curled the end of her upper lip. "I'm not sure I want to know."

"That lump," said a deep voice from behind them, "is the still undigested remains of a doeling goat. Cedric, he favors pork, when he gets his druthers. Goats happen to be cheaper."

Blaze and Connie turned to face a tall, barrel-chested man with a head like an ostrich egg and an Adolph Menjou mustache that must have measured twelve inches across. He wore a black sleeveless T-shirt and matching leotards.

"Kurt Meyerbaum?"

"That's me. And you're from the police, right? I wondered when you'd get around to us."

Blaze identified himself, and Connie. "You were expecting us?"

"Of course. When three people die the way those Indians did, any boa constrictor in a fifty-mile radius has got to be a prime suspect."

"I thought Cedric was a python," Connie ventured.

"He is, ma'm. A python *is* a boa. And, as you can see, a big one. But Cedric is not your killer, Mr. Blaze. He has not left that enclosure since our arrival in Kelowna over three weeks ago."

"We only have your word on that," Blaze told him.

Meyerbaum stiffened. "If you knew your snakes, Mr. Blaze, you would know that Cedric, in or out of that enclosure, could not possibly be responsible for those deaths."

"How so?"

"The girls' bodies were recovered, were they not? Intact. If Cedric had crushed them, he would also have swallowed them."

Connie blanched. "Yuck."

Blaze decided on a new approach. "I understand, Mr. Meyerbaum, that you have no special love for our Indian brothers, and that you have not been adverse to making those views known."

"They may be *your* brothers, Blaze," Meyerbaum huffed angrily, "but they sure in hell aren't mine. Sisters, neither, for that matter. Okay? The only good wahoo I ever seen," he finished vehemently, "was a dead one."

Blaze ignored the man's outburst and dug into his pocket for a business card. He scribbled an address on the back. "We have pictures of the three victims, down at Headquarters, on Doyle Street. I want you to have a look at them. Sometime today. With your specialized

knowledge of snakes, you may be able to shed some light on how they died."

The snake handler bristled. "Is that an order, Blaze, or a request?" "Take your pick," the big ex-Mountie told him evenly, "just be there."

THE SUN HAD NOT YET DIPPED BEHIND THE SCORCHED Westside hills when the police launch came putt-putting slowly along, barely raising a ripple, just off the sandy shore of Hot Sands Beach. Stu Blaze stood on the bow, legs spread for balance, scanning the water ahead for the half-submerged log he had nudged out into the lake some eight hours earlier.

"Not a sign of it," he said to the officer at the wheel. "Follow through under the bridge to the south side. And keep it slow."

"Maybe it sank," Connie offered helpfully from a cozy seat in the stern. She rattled the ice cubes in a tall drink and took a tentative sip.

"How'd that green-eyed gringo get on board?" Blaze growled without taking his eyes from the water.

The officer at the helm glanced back at Connie with a playful wink. "I think it's a stowaway, sir."

"Get rid of it," Blaze told him with feigned annoyance. "Tell it to take a 10-7."

Connie squealed. *10-7; out of the vehicle.* "Brute! I'm not an *it*, I'll have you know, I'm a *she*. And walking on water is not one of my best—"

"*There* it is," Blaze called from the bow. He pointed ahead to where the knotty upper portion of the log was just visible above the surface of the water, glowing red in the fiery light of the rapidly sinking sun. "It must be half a mile or more from where it was this morning."

"What now?" the officer asked as he maneuvered the boat toward the log.

"We bend a line on it," Blaze told him, "and tow it back the way we came. Head for that first beach access beyond the yacht club, off Manhattan Point."

"And?"

"We turn it loose, of course."

The officer coughed softly and looked skyward. "Of course," he said.

"STU, HOW'D YOU EVER COME BY THE NAME OF BLAZE?" Connie sat across from him, over breakfast, in a small restaurant one city block from the park. It was a brilliant, sunny Wednesday morning.

"You mean you don't know? You, of the beautiful, emerald green eyes? I never told you?"

Connie felt herself blush like an adolescent. It annoyed her at times, that he could do this to her. "Nope, you never did."

"Well," Blaze said preemptively, holding a forkful of Canadian flapjack-and-sausage up for inspection before popping it into his mouth. "When my father first arrived in Canada, some fifty years ago, from the Ukraine (where else?), the name on his passport was Blazenki. Ivan Blazenki. And although he had always been proud of his name and his heritage, it didn't take him long to figure out that he'd stand a better chance in this brave new world if he dropped the *nki*, along with his accent, and his penchant for pirozshke and borsch. Losing his accent gave him the most trouble, until he met and married a comely Scott immigrant who taught him to pinch his pennies and roll his *r,s*. She then insisted that her first-born be called Stuart, not Ivan, and as the original Ivan Blaze humbly acquiesced, she grandly bestowed upon an unsuspecting but grateful world, the one, the only—Stuart Blaze." He made a modest bow.

"How quaint," said an unruffled Connie, "you've just admitted to being a mongrel."

"Isn't everybody?"

"Yeah, but scotch and vodka? Criminy, what a mixture."

"You're jealous," Blaze countered with a chuckle. "A nasty trait. Something to do with your green eyes, I imagine." He gave her an irritating, I-forgive-you look. "How'd you like to hear what I'm working on, with that log? I meant to fill you in last night, but it was too late."

"Says you." Connie made a wry face. "It wasn't too late for what I had in mind. If you had listened to me, you'd be the price of one hotel room richer this morning." She winked one magnificent eye at him.

"Uh-huh." Blaze polished off the remnants of his breakfast. "You've got a one-track mind, my love." He pushed the dishes to one side and opened out a large map of the Okanagan Valley. "Prepare," he said, "to be edified."

"Oh, joy."

Blaze hunched his heavy shoulders over the table and drew a blunt finger down the length of Okanagan Lake. "Let's first establish that although this is, indeed, a lake, as our young constable so aptly pointed out; and while it does not possess a current, *per se*, as one would expect to find in a river; it does have an indigenous, north-to-south flow. Okanagan Lake, you see, is just one link in a whole chain of lakes and rivers that drain south out of the Shuswap water shed (a hundred miles

to the north), down through the Okanagan Valley to the American border."

"Mmmm." Connie looked thoughtful. "If I read you right, you're about to suggest that those deaths may not have occurred off Hot Sands Beach at all."

"Correct. But you're getting ahead of me." Blaze covered the map on the table with another, a more detailed blow-up of the greater Kelowna area. "Look here, Connie, along the shoreline of the lake, going north from the bridge. First, Hot Sands Beach, with the park behind it, then the yacht club, and then these two promontories of land, Manhattan Point and Poplar Point, in that order. Notice, too, that between the yacht club and Manhattan Point, it's just too cluttered to allow anyone clear access to the water's edge, and between Manhattan Point and Poplar Point, there's a string of log booms (about here) that would certainly impede, if not prohibit, the southerly drift of anything that might be floating in the water."

"Which," Connie followed through, "leaves Manhattan Point and Poplar Point as the only locations where a body could logically have been dumped into the lake with any reasonable expectation of having it show up at the bridge, five to eight hours later."

"You got it."

Connie tilted her pretty head expectantly. "That log we set adrift last night, off Manhattan Point. Where did it end up this morning?"

Blaze was into an all-thumbs attempt at refolding the maps. "I took a walk down there before breakfast. At 5:30 A.M., the log had already floated past the bridge and was well on its way down the lake to where we picked it up yesterday."

"So Poplar Point it is."

"Well, yes and no." He handed the maps over to Connie, still unfolded. "This whole exercise presupposes that the girls were murdered on land before being dumped into the water."

"It also presupposes that you're not giving much weight to the Ogopogo theory."

Blaze heaved a heavy sigh. "Connie, the way those girls died is so macabre, I don't think we can really presuppose anything. I guess I'm just reaching for an alternative, *any* alternative, to that of an avenging lake monster picking off Indian virgins."

"I know what you mean." Connie chewed thoughtfully at her lower lip. "Incidentally, what did Meyerbaum have to say about the pictures?"

"What else? He told Ghost that no wild creature could possibly have made those spiral bruises. They were too precise, he said, too uniform

in width and spacing."

"Did he have any other solution?"

"Oh, yeah." Blaze chuckled grimly. "And just what you'd expect from Meyerbaum. He told Ghost about an old Indian method of torture, where they would bind their victims with leather thongs that had been soaked in water, wrapped tightly around the chest and abdomen, and around the head. When the thongs dried, slowly, they shrank, and tightened—"

"Oh, wow!"

"Oh, *ouch!* would be more like it."

WHEN BLAZE TELEPHONED THE TOURIST INFO CENTER AT the west end of the floating bridge, he was told that Roland Rocque was a volunteer worker and only went in on Thursdays. And yes, he could probably be reached at his home, a lake-front property out on Poplar Point Drive.

"Another pig in a poke?" Connie smirked. "We do seem to be over-run with convenient irrelevancies, don't we, Mr. Blaze, sir?"

"Watch it, shorty. Nobody likes a smartass."

Nevertheless, the implications were obvious. Roland Rocque's property proved to be the first in a row of lake-front residences beyond the point. It was conveniently situated next to an open beach-access area, where the road skirted around a sheer rock-face at lake level, then went winding up Knox Mountain's western slope to a small eagle's-nest community called Herbert Heights. The house itself was sequestered behind a high laurel hedge and huddled darkly under a cover of towering conifers. A five-year old blue Ford was parked in the driveway. It was not until they were well onto the property that they noticed the fire hydrant.

"Do you see what I see?" Connie pointed a puzzled pinkie.

"You never saw a hydrant before?"

"Not in the middle of a lawn. Especially when there's another one just like it at the end of the driveway."

Blaze shrugged it off. "The guy's supposed to be a retired fire chief, remember? Maybe the hydrant's a keepsake, or a kind of lawn ornament. Or," he grinned, "a 'happiness-is' gizmo for a pet poodle."

Connie summed it up. "Weird," she said, "you *and* the hydrant."

Roland Rocque was not a big man, but he had a gaunt, lean look about him that would have earned him notice in any walk of life, not least as chief of a fire department. His hair was black, and short, and straight, and his eyes lurked well back in his skull, dark and alive, like two shiny black beetles.

"Well," he said, "state your business." He spoke through his teeth, barely moving his thin lips.

Blaze hurried through the I.D. routine, with a brief explanation of why they were there. "I understand," he concluded, "that you are something of an authority on this Ogopogo thing, the lake monster."

"*N'Ha-a-itk*," Rocque admonished with apparent feeling. "And *N'Ha-a-itk* is god, Mr. Blaze, not a monster."

"Yes, well—if we can believe the news media, your *N'Ha-a-itk* has just taken the lives of three innocent young girls."

"Indeed he has, Mr. Blaze. And according to Indian legend, *N'Ha-a-itk* will have merely claimed his own, while they were still pure of body and heart."

Connie's eyes searched the man's strange intensity. "Do you really believe that, Mr. Rocque? Are you condoning those deaths?" She looked totally aghast. "That's nothing but an old Indian legend."

"It is not for me to question the authenticity of a legend, Miss Wells, Indian or otherwise. I am only quoting it."

"But the deaths of the three girls," Blaze persisted, "are you seriously convinced they were the handiwork of Ogo—uh, *N'Ha-a-itk*?"

"I would be happy to consider any alternative, Mr. Blaze. Do you have one?"

Blaze remained silent for several awkward moments. "No," he said at last, "at least, not as yet."

"Well, then. Until you do, perhaps you'd best excuse me. Sir. Madam." The swarthy ex-fire-chief stepped back and closed the door.

Connie winced. "So much for Roll and Rock," she said.

THE HEADLIGHTS OF THE VAN PICKED OUT THE SHEER rock-face beside the road as Blaze nosed the vehicle over toward the lake, onto the sandy shoulder of the beach access. Around the curve and out of sight, just a hundred yards ahead, was the cloistered house and hydrant of Roland Rocque.

As Blaze switched off the lights and motor, Connie cowered back against the seat. "Oh, horrors," she breathed, in a throaty, theatrical whisper, "I know what you're up to. You've brought me to this desolate place to take advantage of me, haven't you?" She choked back a sob. "Poor me, I'm so alone and helpless—"

Blaze reached for the door handle. "You're about as helpless as a school of caribe," he laughed.

"Keh-ree-bee? What's that?"

"Piranha, my love. Cannibal fish. They also have been known to

attack men." He was out of the door and headed for the lake edge.

Connie scurried in hot pursuit. "Sadist," she wailed after him. "Then why *are* we here?"

"To put this log back into the lake."

Connie stopped and stared. "How'd that thing get back here?"

"I had the police launch tow it back this morning," he said, straddling the beached log. "Help me get it into the water."

Connie stepped one foot over the log and turned to face him. When she stooped, her face was only inches from his. "Do piranhas kiss before they bite?" she asked as she delivered a quick peck.

Blaze gave a sudden, unassisted heave, and the log slithered between her legs and into the water. Connie straightened, dusting off her hands. "What now?"

Blaze scooped her up in his massive arms and headed for the van. "Biting time," he said, baring his teeth.

THURSDAY MORNING SAW BLAZE, CONNIE, AND GHOST sitting in Warfield's office, sipping coffee from styrofoam cups that Jan Thurston had brought in. When Warfield breezed through the door a few minutes later, the girl presented him with a large, steaming, china mug, with his name and rank painted on it.

"Preferential treatment," said Blaze.

"Outright discrimination," said Connie.

"Pulling rank," said Ghost.

John Warfield regarded each one in turn with feigned disaffection. "One more crack," he said, "and I'll GOA the grub."

Jan Thurston took that moment to re-enter with a plate of doughnuts. She laughed. *GOA; Gone On Arrival.* "Too late," she said, "and don't leave any for me, *please*. I'm on a diet."

"Aren't we all," Connie griped.

Warfield leaned back in his chair with his coffee in one hand, a doughnut in the other. "Well," he said, "are we any closer today, in knowing the *who*, and the *what*, and the *how*, of this Ogopogo imbroglion?"

"*Imbroglion*," Connie echoed softly, with an ill-advised, la-di-da waggle of her pretty head.

"Yes, and no, no," Blaze said quickly, in a gallant attempt to draw Warfield's attention away from his sassy cohort.

"What kind of an answer is that?" Warfield queried, with an oblique scowl at Connie.

"Yes, I do know who; and no, no, I don't know what, or how. Yet."

"You know?" Connie gasped. "Who—?"

"Roland Rocque," Ghost speculated with a murky smirk.

Blaze nodded his head. "Could be, Ghost. That guy is a 10-15 if I ever saw one." *10-15; a mental case.* "Did you run the check I called for?"

"I did." Ghost reached for his briefcase and snapped it open. He handed Blaze a brown file folder. "It's all there, Stu, and for what it's worth, Roland Rocque is not the name he was born with."

"He's an Indian, isn't he?"

"Roland Rocque?" Connie spouted in surprise. "Are you kidding?"

"Full-blooded," Ghost confirmed, with a don't blame-me shrug at Connie. "His Indian name was Rolling Rock; hence, Roland Rocque. The first thing his mother saw at his birth must have been a highway sign. Happily, she left off the 'Watch For.' The name change, by the way, was done legally."

Blaze rifled the file impatiently. "Give us a verbal on this, will you, Ghost?"

"Okay. Here it is in a nutshell. Rocque grew up on a reservation. He was educated in one of those typical Indian schools they have scattered around the interior. When he was of age, he joined the Canadian Army, went over-seas in '39, and stayed on when the war ended. He kept his nose clean and struggled up through the ranks to non-com, a sergeant, in charge of a Fire Detail. He never married. When his hitch was up, he took his pension, and, on the strength of his army training, applied for a job—Fire Chief, in Osoyoos. That's a small Okanagan border town, just over the line from Oroville, Washington, about seventy-five miles south of here."

"I thought that was a volunteer unit," Warfield interjected, "in Osoyoos, I mean."

"It is. Or, at least, it was. At the time, the Chief was the only one who drew a salary. Anyway, after a couple of smoke-filled years, Rocque was finally caught setting his own fires and summarily canned."

"Figures," Blaze grunted.

Warfield rang for more coffee. "What makes you think he's our man, Stu?"

"Well—" Blaze paused for a refill from Jan Thurston. "For a case to be this weird, John, there has to be a weirdo in it somewhere. And for my money, you'll go a long way before you find anyone weirder than Rocque. Something must have toppled his teepee when he was down in Osoyoos and began lighting those fires, and unless I miss my guess, he's been on his own private little warpath ever since. I'm just surprised they didn't plunk him in the pokey then."

"They knew he was guilty," Ghost said, "but they couldn't prove it in court."

"Yeah." Blaze heaved a sigh. "Join the club."

"But what have you actually got, Stu," Warfield persisted, "that ties Rocque to these killings?"

"Nothing definite, John. Call it a hunch if you like, but it's really more than that. Everything just seems to keep pointing in Rocque's direction. Take the three victims, for a start. They were female, young, and naked; but they weren't molested. Doesn't figure. Maybe they were sacrificial lambs, eh? A big step up, I'll admit, from chickens and pigs; but not unfeasible. And, more to the point, they were all Indians. Rocque is an Indian. Ogopogo (aka *N'Ha-a-itk*) is an Indian legend. In fact, from where I sit, this whole snafu has an Indian calling card on it."

Blaze paused to sip his coffee.

"Keep talking," Warfield told him.

"Yeah, well—there seems to be uniformity and precision to every mother-lovin' facet of this case. Ritualistic, almost; or, you could say, militaristic. Rocque, again, on both counts. Think about it: all three bodies were found on consecutive Friday mornings, all in the same general area; they all died in the same bizarre way, and were in the water for the same relative length of time. Even the spiral bruises, as Meyerbaum pointed out, on all three girls, were curiously equidistant from neck to knee."

"I guess that rules out Ogopogo," Ghost put in, "or, for that matter, any other wild creature. All that leaves us with now, is Meyerbaum's 'wet-thong' theory."

"And as flakey as it sounds, Ghost, it's the only solution, thus far, that runs consistent with the autopsy reports. And it is something that Rocque would know about. I think you'd better have a look inside that house, out at Poplar Point, but wait until he leaves for the Tourist INFO Center. This is his day to be there, and I don't want to tip our hand."

Ghost drifted to his feet. "In the meantime, where will you be?"

"Connie and I will be tied to Rocque like a tin can to a cat's tail." Blaze turned to his green-eyed confederate. "I checked out that log this morning," he told her. "It was at the bridge, right about where the girls' bodies were found. There's no doubt now, in my mind, that those kids were dumped, dead, into the lake, somewhere out at Poplar Point."

"Then what do you hope to prove by tailing Rocque?" the inspector queried. "Why not just stake out the point?"

"It's too soon for that, John." Blaze levered himself out of his chair. "Whatever happened to those girls had to begin during the day prior to the discovery of their bodies. And there just has to be some connection between the killings and Rocque's volunteer stint at the INFO Center. If Rocque *is* our man, and he strikes again on schedule, he should be lining up his fourth victim sometime during the next twelve hours. I'd like to be there when he does."

"And if Rocque is not our man?"

"Then tomorrow morning," Blaze said grimly, "instead of a log, we'd better look for another dead Indian."

THE BETTER PART OF THREE HOURS HAD ELAPSED SINCE they had pulled in and parked within easy viewing distance of Rocque's blue Ford. Connie sat sweating it out beside Blaze in a gray, unmarked Plymouth (the air-conditioned van would have been too conspicuous), watching an endless flow of tourists come and go from the INFO Center at the west end of Okanagan Lake bridge. They were dressed for the part—Connie in olive-green shorts and a tank top, Blaze in white slacks and T-shirt—looking like any other vacationing couple in the ever-changing conflux of cars and people.

"The Ogopogo hype might be keeping people out of the lake," Connie said, stifling a yawn, "but it hasn't done much to dampen the flow of traffic over the bridge."

"There are plenty of other lakes and recreational attractions in the valley," Blaze reminded her. "But, not to worry, my love. Ogopogo won't be wearing the villain's hat much longer."

"You truly are convinced that Rocque is behind those horrible killings, aren't you?"

"I am."

"Then how did he do it, Stu? And *why*?"

"I don't know yet. And even when I do, I don't expect the why of it to make any sense to anyone but Rocque, himself. And *N'Ha-a-itk*, maybe. As for the how? Well, let's wait and see what Ghost comes up with."

"Not much," said a gray voice behind them. The faint click of a door handle and the almost imperceptible dip of the car's springs had preceded the words by a split second.

Connie spun on her olive-green axis. "My God, Ghost. You do have a way of—popping up."

Blaze chuckled. "How'd you find us, Ghost?"

"You're sitting in my car, remember?"

"This isn't a car, it's a sauna on wheels." Blaze wiped the

perspiration from his forehead with the back of a thick wrist. "What'd you find out at Poplar Point?"

"The house is an Indian museum, Stu. The walls are covered with portraits of legendary Indian chiefs; Sitting Bull, Crazy Horse, Cochise, Running Bear. Scenes of historic Indian battles, including a dozen or more of the ever infamous Little Bighorn. Old Indian beads and bric-a-brac, souvenirs, arrowheads, snowshoes, peacepipes. You name it. Everything but a squaw in a wigwam."

"Nothing besides memorabilia?"

"Food (dried herbs, pemmican, stuff like that), a few books, clothing. That's about it."

"In the attic, or basement?"

"No attic, just a crawl. Nothing. Half-basement on a split-level. Nothing." Ghost scratched at his gray grizzle of hair. "There was one thing, Stu. An old fire hose. In the basement. And, uh—a couple of odd-looking, castiron ring-bolts, about four inches in diameter and spaced five or six feet apart, embedded in the concrete floor."

"Hmm. Sounds like the house was built on a mooring slab. Nothing else? Nothing unusual?"

"A fire hose isn't unusual?"

"Not to an ex-fire-chief. What about the hydrant?"

"It's the real thing, Stu. They changed the property line when Rocque bought the place. Something to do with updating an old survey. Anyway, they installed a new hydrant out on the road allowance, and just didn't bother to take the old one out."

"Is it hooked up?"

"Yep. According to City Works. But like the guy said, 'who cares?'"

"Anything else?"

"Yeah." Ghost dug into his pocket and handed over a small polybag that contained what looked to be a short coil of blackened metal.

"What is it?"

"A zipper, I think. It's pretty well burned. I found it out back, in one of those forty-five gallon drums, the kind they use for burning rubbish. Might just be one of Rocque's."

"Uh-huh." Blaze held the bag up to the light. "And then again, it might not."

IT WAS LATE IN THE AFTERNOON WHEN CONNIE FIRST noticed the young Indian girl, walking slowly down the long west hill-toward the bridge. She wore blue jeans and a faded yellow blouse. And even from a distance, Connie could identify the high delicate cheek

bones, the Oriental eyes, the long, lank, blue-black hair. A limp canvas tote-bag was slung over one shoulder. She could not have been more than fifteen years old.

When the girl drew abreast of the INFO Center's parking area, she paused shyly to contemplate a bevy of kids her own age, Caucasian, well-dressed and well-fed, and there was a look of stoic envy in her dark eyes. When they noticed her watching, the girl turned away, walking slowly on toward the bridge, and Kelowna.

Connie sighed, intoning and paraphrasing the old chestnut: "*Poor little lamb who has lost her way.*"

"It isn't so much that they stray from the flock," Blaze said, waxing philosophical, "It's that the flock just doesn't have enough shepherds."

"Did we, when we were that age?"

"Oh, I think so. At least we were given a hell of lot better chance at survival than they get. We're still living in a world of racial bigotry, Connie, and like it or not, no one of us is blameless or totally immune."

"Oooo. You sound grim."

"Not so grim as I feel. I just can't forget that three innocent kids have died, and we're faced with the chronological threat of there being a fourth, tonight. I feel as those I'm between the devil and a dead place."

"Speak of the devil," Connie said, pointing. "There's our renegade redskin."

Roland Rocque had emerged from the INFO Center and was headed briskly toward his car. In seconds, he was behind the wheel of the blue Ford, intimidating his way out into the flow of bridge traffic. A dozen cars slipped by before Blaze could get the grey Plymouth into line behind him.

"He's sure in an all-fired hurry," Connie noted, craning her head to hold him in view. "Wait," she said suddenly, "he's pulling over, stopping, right on the bridge," then a plaintive, "oh, no."

The traffic wormed its way around the flashing rear lights of the stalled ford, and just as the Plymouth drew abreast, Blaze caught a glimpse of the Indian girl's dark head disappearing into the open, passenger-side door.

"Sacrificial lamb number four," Blaze muttered under his breath.

As they left the bridge, Blaze hung a hard right at the first intersection, then did a quick, illegal U-y. He parked facing the traffic, at right angles to the bridge. The Ford went by as the light changed and Blaze swung in behind it, holding back to let a station wagon full of

kids and camping gear move between them.

"My God," Connie breathed, hunching forward against the dash, "whatever you do, don't lose them."

The Ford turned left at the third traffic light, heading north. Blaze followed. "Right on cue," he said grimly. "Poplar Point, here we come."

IT WAS AS THOUGH THE SUN HAD FALLEN WITH A GREAT splash into a pool of blood, drenching the western sky with diverging streaks of crimson. As far as one could see, from the placid surface of the lake to the crests of the low-lying mountains, from the city's indigenous sprawl to the surrounding hillside quilts of farms and orchards, everything had taken on the sanguinary hue of the dying day.

"It looks positively ominous," Connie said in a small hushed voice. "I'm not normally superstitious, but—"

"But, *what?* For Pete's sake, Connie. First Warfield with his stupid smoke signals, now you." Blaze snorted with exasperation. "All I need now is for Ghost to come up with a hot tip from a Ouija board."

"I heard that, you hunky heretic."

The van was parked at the lake edge, out of sight of the Rocque property. Blaze sat in the front seat, monitoring the two-way AM/FM radio receiver, built into the dash and crystal-tuned to pick up Ghost's small portable hand unit. Connie huddled beside him, chewing her nails. The gray voice had emanated from the speaker.

"I read you, Ghost. What's up?"

A crackle of static, then, "Nothing yet, Stu. I'm within fifteen feet of the fire hydrant, like you wanted, and I'm out of sight. But tell me—

"Well?"

"What am I doing here?"

"Sonner or later, Ghost, Rocque is going to show out there, and I want you to nab him."

"Sure, but why? Why don't we just go in and get him?"

"I'll explain later. Just don't let him get too close to that fire hydrant."

There was the sound of a long painful sigh. "Over and out, Blazenki."

Connie handed Blaze a cup of coffee from a steaming thermos. "You already know how he killed those girls, don't you?" she said quietly.

"Yes."

"I don't suppose you'd like to—"

"Later."

Connie poured herself a cup of coffee, then focused her green eyes on him through the rising steam. "Is she safe, in there?"

"For the moment."

"But why, Stu? Why put her through it? Why don't we move in like Ghost says?"

"We don't have enough on him, that's why. Not yet. When we take this guy in, Connie, I want him to stay in. For keeps."

"But, Stu, that poor girl—"

"She'll get over it." Blaze opened the glove compartment and drew out an old service revolver from his army days, A Smith & Wesson .38, mounted on a colt frame. He spun the loaded cylinder and set the gun up on the dash, within easy reach. "It'll give the kid something to tell her grandchildren," he added without humor.

THE OKANAGAN TWILIGHT WAS SLOW A BUT TOTAL PROCESS; red to rusty gray, gray to velvet black. And the heat of the day seemed to drain off over the lip of the horizon with the last vestiges of light. Connie shivered in her olive-green shorts.

"I think I'll change into something warmer while I've got the chance," she told Blaze. Then, later, in jeans and sweater, she stewed through another hour of edge-of-the-seat horripilation before Ghost finally sounded the alarm.

"There's movement at the west side basement window-well, Stu." Ghost's muted voice sounded like he was calling a golf game at Rancho Mirage. "He's shoving something out. Damn. I can't make out what it is."

"Stay with it, Ghost." Blaze reached for the .38, checked the safety, and shoved it under his belt. No dome-light came on as he opened the door and left it ajar.

Seconds dragged into minutes, then, *crackle*, "He's coming out the side door, Stu. Now he's going over to the window. What the—? He's hauling one end of that damn hose out toward the hydrant. And, Stu—*Jeeeez!* You should see the guy."

"Tell me."

"All he's got on is a loin cloth and moccasins. And he's got war paint smeared all over—"

Blaze was out of the door and running, Connie close behind with surprising drive and speed. They broke through the encircling hedge almost in unison, then braked to a startled stop before a moon-lit scene that had all the makings of a B-run western.

Ghost was face down on the lawn, his head bloodied. The near-naked Rocque was poised above him, all paint and feathers, a

tomahawk raised above his head. Blaze fired from the hip and the Indian gave a whoop of pain. The tomahawk made a slow, harmless arc over Ghost's head and buried itself in the lawn. Rocque dropped to one knee, hugging his right wrist.

Connie, following the path of the bullet, pounced on the wounded redskin with cuffs at the ready. But Rocque wasn't done yet. As one handcuff clicked onto his damaged wrist, he shot his arm up, over Connie's head, forcing the linking chain of the cuffs tight against her throat. He held it there with his good arm and turned to face Blaze.

"An Indian stand-off," Blaze muttered. He glared threateningly, but Rocque was implacable. He tightened the chain and waited. One sharp tug, Blaze knew, could break Connie's neck.

Ghost was beginning to stir on the lawn and Blaze used the distraction to edge closer. But Rocque caught the movement and swung obliquely to them, keeping both men in view. "Back off," he snarled.

It was then that Connie became a sudden, unexpected blur of movement. She drove her butt back into Rocque's midsection, taking him off balance. Then with her hands cupping his, to take the pressure off her neck, she powered her whole hundred and seventeen pounds toward Mother Earth. Rocque's gaunt frame took to the air, twisting above her in a tight, punishing jack-knife. Before the Indian touched terra-firma, Blaze was on him.

THE HIGHWAY WAS HEAVY WITH TRAFFIC AS THE BLACK van headed out of Kelowna, north on 97. Blaze was at the wheel, his rugged, boyish face wreathed in his classic, post-case, "Well-I'm-glad-that's-over" look.

He turned to Connie, who sat quietly at his side. "Well, I'm glad that's over," he said.

Connie arched an auburn eyebrow at him. "I'd never have guessed." She wore jeans and a shirt of white denim. A white cloth choker circled her bruised throat.

"How's the neck?" Blaze asked.

"It *has* seen better days." Her voice was an unintended sexy whisper. "You'll just have to be a little inventive when you make passionate love to me."

"I'll keep that in mind."

They rode in silence for some time, until Connie pointed out the window to a long, narrow stretch of water that was slipping by on their right. "That must be Kalamalka Lake," Jan Thurston told me to watch out for it." The lake's mirror-like surface was a kaleidoscope of colors: blues, greens, and swirling florescent ribbons of turquoise.

"The lake was named after an Indian chief," Connie expounded huskily, "Kalamalka, which actually translates to mean the colorful velvet stage in the growth of a deer's antlers, but, time and tribe seem to have deferred to a somewhat more liberal interpretation, 'Lake of Many Colors,' a *nom de guerre* by which it is now widely known."

"Your French-Canadian slip is showing," Blaze told her sardonically.

"I'm only half French."

"Oh?"

"On my mother's side."

"And on the other?"

"Welsh."

"So you're a half-breed, just like me."

"Two of a kind," Connie rasped. "When we get married, we'll have quarter-breed kids and octonocular grandchildren who'll be able to look eight ways before crossing the street."

Blaze rolled his eyes toward Mountie heaven. "Anyway," he conceded, "I am impressed with this place. It certainly lives up to its license-plate logo: *Beautiful British Columbia*. I hate to be leaving so soon."

"We'll be back soon enough for the trial," Connie reminded him. She put a tentative hand to her bruised throat. "By the way, how is Ghost this morning?"

"Not what you'd call in the pink," Blaze chuckled, "but with Ghost, wan is wonderful. Rocque's tomahawk left him with a mild concussion and a scalp-raising headache, but he'll be okay."

"Thank God." Connie shuddered. "I can still see that poor girl, Stu, in the basement, all wound up in the fire hose. She was scared stiff."

"Wouldn't you be?"

"I guess. Not to mention, embarrassed. But I don't understand how he actually did that. You know, with the hose."

"Have you ever tried to hang on to the working end of one of those fire hoses?"

"No, of course not."

"It sometimes takes two, even three strong men, Connie, just to keep the nozzle pointed in the right direction. Water is incompressible, that's a natural law; its hydraulic force can be devastating. What Rocque did, in effect, was to harness that power in about twenty feet of hose, to make it look as though *N'Ha-a-itk* had, indeed, claimed his virgin brides."

"That I know, but—"

"The ring bolts in the concrete floor were the key, Connie. After

wrapping his victims with the flattened hose as tightly as he could, he simply passed it through the ring-bolts, capping and anchoring one end, and attaching the other end to the hydrant. When he turned on the valve, swelling the hose with water, an unrelenting, bone-crushing pressure of almost a hundred pounds to the square inch was exerted along the entire length of the hose. It truly must have been like being crushed by a giant snake; or, as Rocque fantasized, by *N'Ha-a-itk*. Not a pleasant way to die."

"Is dying ever pleasant?" Connie wondered with an appropriate shiver. "What mystifies me, though, is how he got those young girls out of their clothes and into the basement. We know they were conscious when they died, and no kid, however naive, would ever submit willingly to anything so—so grotesque."

"We may never know, Connie, but my guess is they were drugged. And yes, I'm well aware the autopsy tests drew a blank, but unless the lab knows what to look for, a rare or obscure drug can often go undetected. They're still analyzing those dried herbs Ghost found in Rocque's house, as well as blood samples taken from the girl we rescued last night. If there's drug residue in either one, they'll find it."

Connie turned with a frown. "Aren't we leaving a little prematurely, Stu? I mean, it's like turning our backs on a hanging before they spring the trap. They still haven't finished sifting the ashes where Rocque burned the girl's clothing."

"Not to worry, Connie. We caught him red-handed (if you'll pardon the pun), and this drug thing, plus whatever turns up in the ashes, is all icing on the cake. The only problem now, will be to insulate Rocque from the do-gooders and the shrinks. If that bunch get their way, they'll slap him on the wrist, tell him 'naughty, naughty,' and turn him loose in six months."

"*N'importe*. We've done our part." Connie yawned prettily; she'd heard it all before. "Where are we going now?"

"Home, where else?"

"Calgary? That's quite a trip, Stu. It's a long time to cooped up in this van—alone—just you and me—together. Don't you think we ought to get married first?"

"And spoil a beautiful friendship?"

Connie snorted in exasperation. "You might just as well capitulate now, Stuart Blaze. It's only a matter of time, you know."

"Think so?"

She leveled her beautiful green eyes at him. "Even ex-Mounties get their man, *mon cher*."

Suddenly she heard an alien sound, and something dark moved past the window. Someone was out there in the darkness, trying to get in to kill her!

Run For Your Life

by HUGH B. CAVE

THERE IT WAS: HIS PICTURE ON THE FRONT PAGE OF THE morning paper. The scraggly mustache and untrimmed beard. The beady, menacing eyes, staring straight at her with a message she remembered only too well. The oversized ears, jutting like jug handles from his long, thin head. And the terrible, terrible headline across the top.

RAPIST ESCAPES FROM STATE PRISON.

She stood there on the sunlit porch with the front door of the house still open behind her. The picture and headline had caught her eye even before she had straightened up with the paper in her hand. And now as her shivering neared the point of being uncontrollable, the telephone in the front room began beeping. It was one of the new phones. To cut

expenses she had turned in the one she'd been renting and bought her own, but still hadn't got used to its silly bird-beep. A telephone should ring.

Hurrying inside to answer it, she almost left the front door open behind her, but remembered in time and turned swiftly to slam it shut. And bolt it. Because he would be coming here; of course he would. He had sworn to "get even."

As she picked up the phone and moaned into it, her hand shook so wildly that the cord beat a rubbery tattoo against the table's edge. Would it be he, calling to remind her of his promise?

No. The voice wasn't Clay Jarret's sandpaperly snarl, but the deep, comforting rumble of her boss, Howard Taine. There was tension in it, though. She recognized that at once, even though she could not remember ever having heard that special quality in Howard's speech before.

"Laurel, thank God I caught you at home!" he was saying. "Have you seen the paper this morning?"

She moved her head rapidly up and down, then realized she was not standing there beside his desk with his good brown eyes focused on her face. "Y-yes," she whispered. "Only just now. I got up late." It was the first day of her two-week vacation and she was not going anywhere—she had no desire to go anywhere alone—and getting up late had been a kind of compensation.

"Laurel, you can't stay there in that house!" She could almost see him leaning toward her, big, strong, with that attractive touch of gray in his hair. She could almost feel his hand gently coming to rest on hers.

"I know," she moaned. "He's sure to come here."

"Get out of there," Howard urged. "Get out right now. Go stay with some friend where you—" He caught himself. He often did that when dictating; his mind was quick to catch a mistake and correct. "No, wait," he went on. "You can't go to a friend's house. He knows your friends. He knows all about you."

He was right, of course. Clay Jarret had worked here for years as a handyman, first for her father, then for her mother when dad died, and then for her when mother passed on. Dear God, he had known her when she was a mere child, walking from this house to the elementary school on Bellview Street, and now she was twenty-six years old!

Clay Jarret knew everything there was to know about her: who her friends were and where they lived; the stores she traded at; the church she attended; the license plate number on her car.

"He may be watching the house this very minute," the deep voice of her boss was saying into her ear. "Look, Laurel. Didn't you tell me

once that you'd installed one of those automatic gadgets on your garage door, to open and close it from your car?"

"Yes," she whispered.

"All right. I'll tell you what you must do—or what *I* would do, at least, if I were you. Pack a bag—just toss in the few absolutely essential things you'll need for a few days, because they'll catch him in a few days, Laurel; they're bound to. Then turn on a few lights around the house so if he comes around tonight he'll think you're on guard and not alone. Are you listening?"

"Yes, Howard." She was shaking, too, with the thought that the man who had raped her—the man who had been sentenced to a long term in prison because of her testimony, and threatened to kill her for it—might even now be outside, waiting for her to blunder into his hands. Or trying to figure out some way to get in at her. Were the windows all locked? She kept them closed at this time of year because of the air conditioning, but were they *locked*? He knew those windows. One of his chores over the years had been to wash them. He had even repaired some of them at times.

"All right," the voice on the phone was saying. "Take your bag and get into your car. Start the motor. Then open the garage door with your automatic opener, close it while you're backing out to the street, and head for my cabin at the lake. You know how to get there, don't you?"

She had been out there with him once. Only once. A rustic log cabin on a three-acre island in Indian Lake—and he owned the island, too. As vice president of a thriving electronics firm, he was not a poor man.

And she could, if she wanted to, become this man's wife; she had known that since the Sunday he showed her the cabin and jokingly, or not so jokingly, told her he planned on taking her there often. There was something about him, though, that made her less than sure she wanted to be that close to him. Something she had never quite been able to put a finger on. Maybe it had to do with the coming into the firm of David Sutter. David was younger and less solemn. And also—she was sure—genuinely interested in her.

"Yes," she said. "I know how to get to the cabin, Howard. But why—"

"Because it's the one place you can go to that he won't know about." That keen mind at work again. "And if you're clever when you leave the house, he won't be able to follow you even if he has a stolen or rented car and is waiting for you in it. Just make a lot of turns before you head for the lake. Following a car isn't as easy as they make it look on television. For an ordinary driver it's next to impossible." A pause. "Laurel?"

"Yes, I'm listening." She had been listening more attentively to something else, though: what she thought was an alien sound at the front door. Had someone out there on the porch tried the knob, hoping to find the door carelessly left unlocked? "I'm listening, Howard."

"You'd better get going," Howard Taine urged. "According to the paper, he escaped early this morning. He's had plenty of time to get to your house."

"Yes." There *was* someone on the porch. Oh, God, there was! "I'm—Howard, why can't I just go to the police?"

"Don't be a fool," he said harshly. "The police never act *until* something happens. Your thinking it *might* happen won't cut any ice with them. Not the cops we have in this city at any rate." His voice sharpened even more. "Go to the *cabin*, Laurel. I'll be out as soon as I can get away. Do you hear?"

"Yes . . ."

"Promise me!"

"I—I'll do as you say."

"Now get out of there! Don't dawdle!"

SHE HUNG UP AND TURNED TO LOOK WIDE-EYED AT THE door. *Had* she heard someone out there? The wind caused that door to rattle sometimes. But she hadn't noticed any wind when she stepped out for the paper.

"*Take what you will need,*" Howard had said. She fled from the living room and ran up the stairs to her bedroom. There wasn't time to rush through the house turning lights on, as he had also advised, but lights wouldn't fool Clay Jarret anyway if he was out there now and saw her leave. Snatching an overnight case from the closet, she tossed it onto the bed and threw things at it from the chest-of-drawers. The slacks and shirt she had on were adequate outer clothing for a brief stay at the lake. Adding a handful of necessities from the bathroom cabinet, she slammed the bag shut and sped down the stairs with it, through the kitchen into the garage.

Her car had been giving trouble, she suddenly remembered with a touch of panic. It stalled sometimes, usually just after she started it, before it was well warmed up. Oh God, why had she put off having it checked? It was a small two-door, five years old. As she slid onto the seat she glanced through the rear window at the garage door: solid wood with no glass. There was no way she could tell if a man were waiting outside in the driveway.

She fumbled the key into the ignition and turned it. The engine caught at once; it always did that, even if it became temperamental a

moment later. To keep it from stalling she raced it before reaching for the button that would cause the garage door to swing up. *Please, please don't quit on me!*

With the button pressed and the wooden barrier rising, she turned hard around on the seat to look out the rear window. She never had been good at using the rear-view mirror for backing up. There was no one in the driveway, thank God. Her foot pressed down on the gas pedal and the car lurched backward.

Half way out of the garage, it stalled.

In a panic she turned the key again. Nothing happened. *Think*, she silently screamed at herself. *The automatic shift thing has to be in PARK or NEUTRAL*. She slammed it into place and turned the key again, so frightened and heavy-handed now, she could easily have snapped both stick and key off. But she was lucky. The engine roared to life. In reverse, the car lurched down the driveway, and a touch on the button brought the garage door rumbling down.

Then she saw him.

It was he—no question of it. The same lank, stoop-shouldered figure, well over six feet. The same long arms and big, dangling hands; only too well she remembered those hands. And the coarse hair that all but hid his face . . . Didn't they make men shave in prison?

He was on the veranda, by the door. As she had suspected, he must have gone up to see if the door were unlocked. But he was not interested in getting into the house now. Lurching to the porch rail, he clutched it with both hands and leaned over it, glaring at her, as she backed the car into the street.

There were cars standing in neighbors' driveways—that was common in this quiet part of the city—and a little way down the street one was parked at the curb on the other side. That was *not* usual. Was it his?

As she finished her turn and slammed her car into forward motion, Clay Jarret let go the porch rail and came bounding down the steps. Not to pursue her on foot. It was too late for that. In the rear-view mirror she saw him go loping across the street toward that car at the curb. Howard had been right. He had either stolen a machine or managed to rent one.

"Make a lot of turns before you head for the lake." That keen mind of Howard's, always one step ahead. *"Following a car isn't easy. For an ordinary driver it's next to impossible."*

She swung left at the next corner. Then right. Left again. For twenty, thirty minutes she worried her way through the city, keeping the sequence of turns in mind so she would not end up back where she had started from. It was only necessary to come out on Route 17, then head

north. And Jarret couldn't know about the cabin. She hadn't known Howard Taine before the rape. *Get to the lake, Laurel. You'll be safe there. Howard will come, and with the keen mind of his he'll know what to do next.*

ROUTE 17 WAS A FOUR-LANE DIVIDED HIGHWAY. AS SHE swung onto it and increased speed, she was certain Jarret could not have followed her. Her heart began to beat more normally again; the sharp pain in her breast faded to a mere ache. But remember, she warned herself, if he does catch you it won't be just a rape like the last time. He said he would kill you.

If she lived to be a hundred she would never forget that "last time." Alone in the house as always, she had stayed up late reading one of Manly Wade Wellman's books about John the balladeer, because she liked that kind of writing, spooky without being terrifying, and it was after one when she went upstairs to bed.

He could have been hiding there for ten minutes or two hours; he knew every inch of the house and was waiting in the bedroom closet for her to come up. Not until she was out of the bathroom, naked, reaching for the nightgown under her pillow, did he step from the closet and show himself.

The stocking mask over his head was ludicrous because she had known this man half her life—the shape and smell of him, the sound of his voice as he threatened to kill her if she screamed; even the determined way his powerful hands reached for her as if about to grasp the handles of a wheelbarrow or lawnmower.

Thank God, though, she had been smart enough to pretend she did *not* know him. So it had been *only* a rape, not the end of living. Which it so easily could have been because when she reported it to the police and they picked him up, other victims came forward to identify him also, and it turned out he was the Stocking Mask Killer who had been raping women in the city for more than two years, and had left two of his victims strangled in their beds.

"I'll get you, Miss Laurel," he had snarled at her while being led from the courtroom. "If it's the last thing I ever do, I'll get you!"

Kill you, he had meant. *Not just rape you again.* The whole way on Route 17 she thought about it.

The lake was twenty miles from the city's business district, Howard had told her on that Sunday when he drove her out to see his cabin. At least once a mile she looked into the rear-view mirror to be sure no car was following her. The way to tell, she told herself, was to maintain a steady 55-mile speed, the legal limit, and see if anyone behind her did,

because most drivers did not. And, true, every car that came up to her went on by. By the time she reached the lake-road turnoff, she felt really safe.

As Howard had said, Clay Jarret wouldn't know anything about the cabin. He'd be watching her friends' homes instead.

IT WAS A DIRT ROAD NOW, LINED WITH DEEP WOODS. QUIET. Peaceful. Half a mile in, she slowed for a lumbering turtle the size of a dinner plate, then saw a rabbit bounding from one side to the other, and then a small deer with its powderpuff tail bobbing. It was going to be all right after all. She would be safe in here. The police would expect Jarret to be looking for her and would—what was the expression?—stake out her house and her friends' houses and catch him. She might even make up her mind about becoming more friendly with Howard.

Howard. He was educated. He had an exceptional mind. He was a gentleman. He was handsome. He was only a little older than she would want a husband of hers to be. Why, then, couldn't she feel toward him the way he obviously wanted her to feel?

It couldn't be because of David Sutter. David wasn't in Howard Taine's league, really. In fact, what did she know about him except that he had come to work for the company four months ago, had made an obvious effort to be friendly without asking any favors, and was—well—fun to talk to? She hadn't been out with him, except for lunch now and then at a nondescript place around the corner from the office. He never called her at home, had never asked for a date. What was it about him that made her think he might—might . . . *oh, don't be silly, Laurel.*

The road had reached the lake. It followed the curving shore and there were scattered houses and mailboxes along it, then the sign she remembered: TAINES, with an arrow pointing left to a pier. She stopped the car in a cleared space where the pier began.

I'm here. I'm safe. He didn't follow me.

The business of getting out to the island caused her some anxiety, though. She had never handled a rowboat before, and if anything went wrong she was not a good swimmer. But having locked the car, she hurried resolutely along the pier to the two boats Howard kept there, dropped into one, and took up the oars. At least the lake was not a large one. The island was only a quarter mile out.

Moved by a light breeze, the dark water glittered in bright sunlight, and for the first time it occurred to her to wonder what the time was. She looked at her wrist and realized she had neglected to wear her

watch. No matter. It must have been about quarter to ten when Howard phoned, and not more than twenty minutes later when she left the house. Add the half hour of turning and twisting through the city, to make sure Clay Jarret could not follow her, and the twenty-mile drive to the lake . . . the time now must be about eleven. The position of the sun, almost overhead in a cloudless sky, seemed to bear that out.

When would Howard be able to get away from the office and come out here? Probably not too early, with her on vacation and someone less able to cope with that busy mind of his trying to take over her secretarial duties. But that didn't matter either, really. She could manage by herself.

THE LAKE APPEARED TO BE DESERTED THIS MORNING. AT least, there were no other boats on it that she could see. It even looked—well—lonely. Of course, there were only a few houses and cabins on its shores, and this was a working day. People probably came out on weekends. Looking over her shoulder, she saw she had reached the island, and a pull on the left oar brought the boat gliding up to the little pier there. Leaving the oars in the boat, she swung her suitcase out, stepped out after it, and made the boat secure.

Then with a glance at the glittering expanse of water between her and the mainland—where she could expect danger to come from if it came—she took up the grip and started along the path to the cabin.

This island was all trees and undergrowth, the path so deprived of sunlight as to be almost dark even now. Underfoot were pine needles that squeaked beneath her sandals and spiced the air with their scent. Something moved just ahead of her and she froze in her tracks. It came toward her, low on the ground, waddling in its gait. A porcupine. It too froze in its tracks and they locked stares. Then the ungainly creature lumbered off into the undergrowth, leaving her standing there with her whole body trembling.

"Whew!" she said aloud. "I must be really up tight."

It would be better at the house.

Howard had shown her, that other time, where he kept a key in case he should absent-mindedly come here without one. Kneeling by the front steps, she reached under them and found it. Then at the door she turned to look at the yard.

It wasn't much of a yard. "I didn't build this retreat to make work for myself," Howard had said. "The less upkeep, the better it suits me." So the clearing was just a little larger than the space required for the cabin itself. No lawn to mow—just a twenty-foot band of wild grass and wild flowers where the brush had been cut back. *If Clay Jarret does*

come, I won't know he's found me until it's too late to run. But Clay wouldn't come here. Why should he?

Entering the cabin, she shut the door behind her and locked it. There were only two rooms, really: a big living room with a handsome fieldstone fireplace, and a fair-sized bedroom. Add a small kitchen—a bachelor's kitchen, Howard called it—and a bathroom, and you had it all. She sank onto the living room sofa wondering whether she ought to phone Howard to tell him she was here, then remembered there was no phone.

"The one thing I won't have here is a telephone," he had said almost in anger. "I'm a slave to that damned machine every working day in my life, and it isn't going to rule me at the cabin."

She sat, trying to think, and realized she was very, very tired, both physically and emotionally. Not hungry, though it was nearly lunch time. Not in need of a drink to pick her up, though Howard kept a supply of liquor in a little pantry off the kitchen. Just exhausted, probably from being frightened ever since reading about Clay Jarret's escape.

You're safe here, Laurel, and there's a bed in the other room. Go use it until Howard arrives.

For a while she just lay there on the bed, fully dressed except for her sandals, listening to the small sounds of the house and its surroundings. The fluttering of some small bird against a window pane. Little scurryings, probably of field mice, on the front porch. The harsh cry of a crow, many times repeated, nearby in the woods. Nothing sinister. No sounds of any human presence, thank God.

She finally fell asleep.

ON WAKING, HER FIRST CONCERN WAS THE TIME. THERE was a wall clock in the kitchen, she remembered—battery operated because the cabin had no electricity. Howard used propane for the stove and refrigerator, and kerosene lamps for light—"and if any guest feels he has to have more than that, he can damned well stay in the city." But when she hurried into the kitchen now, she found the clock stopped. Its battery must have died.

No clock. No watch. Unlocking the front door, she walked out onto the porch and looked around. She must have slept for hours. True, the sky was almost solidly cloudy now, and that would mean early darkness, but the day was obviously ending anyway.

Where was Howard? Why didn't he come?

Frightened again, she retreated into the cabin and relocked the door. Should she light a lamp? If she did, anyone who came prowling would

know the place was occupied, and she didn't want to advertise that fact, did she? If by some horrible stroke of chance Clay Jarret *did* know about the cabin or *had* been able to follow her here, and came over to the island in that other boat, the place had better be dark. If he saw a light, he would break in. It wouldn't be hard to smash and open a window.

Sit in the dark and wait, Laurel. But, please, Howard, don't make me wait much longer!

The big living room was not really dark when she began her vigil, but it soon became so. Seated there on the sofa facing the fireplace, she clenched her hands and tried to keep her fear from soaring. Tried to decide what she should do *if*.

If, for instance, she heard some human sound outside. It would be Howard, of course, and he had a key, but he wouldn't simply unlock the door and walk in, knowing he might frighten her half to death if he did. He would knock on the door and call her name, and let her open the door to him. But what if she heard human sounds and nothing like that *happened*? Then it wouldn't be Howard; it would be someone else.

Suddenly she did hear an alien sound, and jerked herself around to peer at the window it seemed to come from. Something dark moved past the glass and the sound came again. A脚步声? It was more like a thud of something solid against the window ledge, as if someone out there, peering in, had unintentionally hit the ledge with something held in his hand. A tool, perhaps, with which he hoped to pry the window open!

In a spasm of fear she rose swiftly to her feet. Someone was out there and it was not Howard. Howard would not be peering in a window to see if she were here. She had to get out of here. Off the island. At once.

There was a back door off the kitchen, beside the little pantry where Howard kept his liquor. Trying to bend low and move slowly, so she would not catch the eye of anyone peering in through a window, she groped her way to it and pressed an ear to it, listening for sounds outside. He had been going the other way, toward the front porch, when she saw him. But she had to be sure.

Hearing nothing, she took in a deep breath and inched the door open. Nothing. Only the darkness and the whisper of a breeze in the trees now, and the earthly smell of things growing. She carefully closed the door behind her, so he would not find it open and know what she had done. Forcing herself to walk slowly was the hardest discipline she had ever imposed on herself. It took forever to reach the path to the lake.

Reaching it, she fled along it with both hands outthrust, lest she

blunder into some overhanging tree limb and make a noise. Would he hear her anyway? He might if he were not too busy trying to break into the cabin. No matter, so long as she reached the boat a few minutes ahead of him. *He* would have come across in the other boat, of course, but she would take that one too and leave him stranded. If she had time enough.

The soft earth underfoot gave way to planking, and she stumbled to a halt. The pier was dark, the lake even darker except for a few reflections of house lights in the distance. With her heart thudding she ran out to where she had tied her boat.

The boat was not there. *No* boat was there. He must have left his own elsewhere and set hers adrift.

Now, dear God, she had to find his before he found her!

THERE WAS A FOOTPATH OF SORTS AROUND THE ISLAND, made and used, Howard had told her, by trespassing kids who came here to fish. She had not walked it; had no idea in which direction Clay Jarret's boat might be. Blindly she turned to the right, and now it was impossible to be quiet. The path was overgrown. It was littered with dead branches that snapped when she stepped on them in the dark.

Hurry, then. He's bound to hear you, so hurry! Your only chance of escaping him is to find the boat!

But the place was so *dark*. Time and again she blundered off the path into the underbrush and had to fight her way back out, once with a savage thicket of bull briars tearing at her slacks and drawing blood from her arms. A little farther on the path suddenly became swampy. Sinking ankle-deep into mud, she lost her balance and pitched forward on hands and knees, getting through the place only by crawling.

But for the moment of nightmare there was a reward. Just beyond the mud was a boat, pulled up on a patch of firm ground between two trees. Staggering to it, she clambered noisily into it, sank onto a thwart, and with a little moan of relief reached for the oars at her feet.

From a point in the darkness not more than five yards away a voice said calmly, "I wouldn't do that if I were you, Laurel."

HER HANDS FROZE IN MID REACH. HER HEAD JERKED UP and then *it* froze as she stared at where the voice had come from. Even before he stepped out into the open where she could see something of him, she knew by his voice that he was not the escaped rapist.

That "I wouldn't if I were you" had been spoken not in Clay Jarret's sandpaper snarl but in the deep, mellow voice of the man who owned this island, her boss, Howard Taine.

He came toward her now with a handgun of some kind snug in his right fist, its muzzle pointing at her. And he was saying in the same deep voice, "Step out of the boat, please, Laurel. We're going back to the cabin."

It must have been his gun she had heard at the cabin window, she thought vaguely. He would have had it in his hand when he peered in. Yes. "Howard," she heard herself saying as she slowly shook her head at him in total bewilderment. "Howard—what—I don't understand."

"Get out of the boat."

She obeyed as if in a trance. Again she said, as he seized her by an arm and pushed her along the path in front of him, "I don't—I don't understand."

"Oh, I think you do," he said. "Keep walking, please. Watch that swampy stretch; you blundered into it before. Good thing you did, or I might not have caught you." And as she circled the spot this time, with his hand on her elbow guiding her: "Oh, yes, you understand. Enough, at any rate. It was not very bright of you to leave the Wendell file on your desk when you went home Friday, though. Not bright at all."

The Wendell file? She tried to remember. Yes, she had been looking at the Wendell file Friday—she had been looking up an address in it for some correspondence she was attending to. And she *had* left it on her desk when she went home. Rose Silvera had said, "I'll take care of it for you, Laurel. I have to hang around anyway. My boyfriend's picking me up."

But of what significance was the Wendell file? Why should her looking at it have caused Howard Taine to turn from an admirer into the kind of beast he was now?

"I don't understand," she moaned again. "What's happened to you?"

"Be quiet." Impatient with her slowness, he gave her a push. "Get to the cabin!"

She tried speaking over her shoulder just once more. "Howard, what are you doing to me? What have I done?"

"I said shut up."

The rest of that nightmare walk to the cabin took place in a terrifying silence. Once inside, Howard ordered her into the bedroom, where he then said, "All right, my dear, take off your clothes."

"What?" she gasped.

"I'm going to kill you, Laurel. Sorry, but you undoubtedly know too much for my peace of mind. And, of course, it has to look as though Clay Jarret did it, and he would have raped you first. So take off your clothes."

"Oh, my God," she whispered.

HE HADN'T MADE A LIGHT—PROBABLY DID NOT INTEND to—and in the dark she could see him only as a tall human shape looming just inside the bedroom doorway. No doubt he still had the gun in his hand. Again he said, "Take off your clothes!" and this time took a single step toward her.

"I—I am," she moaned, and began to do so.

It was even worse, if possible, than that other time. For Clay Jarret she had not had to undress herself; he had stepped from the bedroom closet when she came already naked from the bathroom. Having to strip for Howard Taine, even in the dark, was surely an added humiliation. But it was her only chance, she realized. She had to get him closer to her, and unless she did as he demanded he would not come closer; he would simply shoot her down from where he stood.

She dropped her shirt on the floor and stepped out of her slacks without removing her sandals. Perhaps he would not notice the sandals. She took off her bra and stepped out of her panties. Suddenly he was in motion, striding toward her.

With all her strength she threw herself at him and flung him aside. Then she ran.

Her surprise attack gave her a few seconds head start because Howard crashed into the bedroom wall and sank to his knees. She ran from the bedroom into the living room and from there into the kitchen. Behind her, Howard let out a bellow of rage as he recovered and began his pursuit. He would use the gun, she supposed, when he felt he could do so effectively.

Knowing the cabin a little now, even in the dark, she raced recklessly for the back door beside the pantry.

It opened in her face. And again, as she crashed into the intruder, she knew it was not Clay Jarret. This time it was her fellow worker at the office, David Sutter.

The force of the impact sent them both reeling out the door into the yard, he with his arms locked around her naked body and she with her heart pounding in new terror. But there in the yard he swiftly released her and, giving her a shove, whispered, "Get down!"

Seconds later Howard Taine came charging from the cabin through the same doorway, and went to ground with a jarring thud when the younger man tackled him. Only one of them got up again, and that one was Sutter. He had Taine's gun in his hand.

"Got to drag him inside," he said to Laurel. "You'd better get some clothes on."

IT HAD ALL HAPPENED FAST, AND SHE WAS STILL dazed. But she returned to the bedroom and dressed herself, and found Taine on the living room floor when she emerged. At Sutter's request she lit some lamps.

"You'll have to go back to town and send the police out, while I stay here and guard him," he said. "By the way, I'm sorry I was so late getting here. I didn't hear his morning phone call you to until an hour ago."

He was on the sofa, Taine's gun in hand, scowling down at the still unconscious vice president of the firm they both worked for. "You see, I had this man's phone tapped but it went on tape, and I always listened to the tapes in the evening."

"Tapped? Tapes?" She shook her head. "I don't understand."

"Someone's been ripping the company off for months, for big money." He shrugged. "The Board of Directors hired me to find out who. I'm a private detective specializing in such shenanigans." The expression on his face was almost apologetic. "Of course, when I heard him insisting you come out here to be safe from the Jarret fellow, instead of going to the police . . . What was it tipped him off? The file you left on your desk Friday?"

She nodded. "But I didn't . . . I was only looking up an address."

"The Wendell file." Again he shrugged. "One of the bigger games he was playing. Well, you'd better get going. You'll find a boat at the pier. I borrowed it from a house on shore, to get out here in. By the way"—he frowned now—"how come you were naked just now?"

"He said he had to rape me before killing me, to make it look like Jarret's work."

Sutter directed a look of loathing at the unconscious man near his feet. "It wouldn't have worked. They caught Clay Jarret a while ago, hanging around your house. I heard a special bulletin on my car radio, driving out here."

She let her breath out slowly in a sigh of profound relief.

Dave Sutter looked at her then with a change of expression. "How about something better than lunch next time?" he asked with a nice, normal smile. "Like dinner and a show, maybe. We owe it to each other, don't you think?"



I was overwhelmed at the enormity of the scheme Moriarty had embarked upon. It was a plan only a genius could have conceived. Or a madman!

The Adventure of The Mysterious Benefactor

by DAVID MacGREGOR

IT WAS A BITTER WINTER'S DAY TOWARDS THE END OF 1890 that found Sherlock Holmes and myself gratefully ensconced in our rooms in Baker Street, each engaged in his individual pursuit. Outside, an Arctic chill had descended upon London and with each blast of frigid air that rattled our windowpanes I found myself taking renewed comfort in the warmth and light that our well-stoked fire afforded. I was in the midst of reviewing my notes concerning some of Holmes' more intriguing cases on the year, when a heavy tread upon the stairs foretold the arrival of an unexpected visitor.

The resounding knock that echoed through our chambers caused Holmes to look up sharply from some chemical experiments he was engaged in and I moved quickly to open the door. As I did, I was greeted by an apparition that fully filled our doorway, a giant of a man rendered even taller by the shiny top hat he wore. Our visitor, doubtless accustomed to the slack-jawed look of wonder I was wearing, stepped into our rooms without invitation and casually flicked off the few snowflakes that had had the temerity to make their way to his collar as he surveyed our quarters in a cool, unhurried manner.

At length, his gaze alit on my friend Sherlock Holmes and, removing his top hat, he executed a sweeping bow. "Mr. Sherlock Holmes," he boomed. "It is indeed a pleasure."

"And a pleasure it is to meet you as well," replied Holmes, "Mr. Morgan Clarkwell."

Our visitor seemed delighted by Holmes' response. "Wonderful, Mr. Holmes, you are everything I expected. Pray tell your line of deduction."

"I'm sure my explanation can wait until we've made ourselves comfortable before the fire," replied Holmes. "Watson, be so good as to fetch our guest a brandy, I'm sure he must be chilled after his journey."

"You're very kind," said Clarkwell as he removed his coat. "It is somewhat bracing out there."

AFTER OUR VISITOR WAS SEATED WITH HIS BRANDY HE repeated his query to Holmes, who shrugged slightly from his armchair before replying. "It was quite elementary, Mr. Clarkwell. Upon your entrance you made a close scrutiny of our rooms before addressing, or even looking at me. I observed your gaze as it travelled the length of our mantelpiece, lingered thoughtfully on the remains of our recent lunch and at length examined with some interest the mass of papers which Watson has seen fit to strew about the floor.

"Long experience has borne out the fact to me that such behavior is observable in only three professions, namely: housekeepers, policeman, and private detectives. Now, if you'll pardon my saying so, Mr. Clarkwell, you haven't the look of a housekeeper and although I am not familiar with all the members of Scotland Yard, I surely would have noticed a man of your stature by this time. Thus, the latter choice was the only one open to me, a choice strengthened by the recollection that only two months ago I read of a case solved by London's second private consulting detective, a Mr. Morgan Clarkwell."

"Marvelous!" cried our visitor as he clapped his hands together.

"I'm glad to see that the reports of your powers have not been exaggerated, Mr. Holmes."

"You're too kind," replied Holmes softly, although it was evident he was pleased at Clarkwell's words. "Tell me, Mr. Clarkwell, what decided you on a career as a private detective?"

"Dr. Watson," answered Clarkwell with a nod in my direction.

"Indeed?" Holmes appeared serious, but I could read a faint look of amusement in his eyes.

"Yes," continued Clarkwell. "Initially I was strictly an insurance investigator and only took on private work for my friends or close family. My interest in it gradually deepened and I'll readily admit that my head was more than slightly turned by the Doctor's glowing accounts of your successes, Mr. Holmes. I decided to pursue it full-time only six months ago."

Here it was my turn to redden at Clarkwell's praise and I hurried to the replenishing of our glasses lest my embarrassment become too obvious. I was much relieved to hear Holmes pick up the string of conversation.

"I trust then, Mr. Clarkwell, that it is a problem of some importance that not only forces you out in this weather, but necessitates the consulting of another private detective."

At Holmes' words Clarkwell seemed to recall the reason for his visit and a faint look of worry came into his eyes. "Yes, Mr. Holmes, I do consider it a pressing problem, and I only hope you won't laugh at its apparent triviality. It's been weighing on my mind all this month and as time has almost run out, I decided to swallow my pride and seek your opinion."

He looked up for a moment, but Holmes' face was an impassive mask. "Go on," said my friend.

"Well," resumed Clarkwell, "it concerns the 25th of this month, tomorrow, that is. Every year, or almost every year, someone breaks into our house and leaves things, and only on that precise date."

"What do you mean 'leaves thing'?" queried Holmes. "What sort of things?"

"Mostly gifts and packages," responded Clarkwell. "Every year it's something—a tie, shoes, perfume for the wife, a tin of meat for the cat. And always gaily wrapped too."

"And this person never takes anything?" pressed Holmes. "Only leaves the gifts?"

"Yes," Clarkwell reached for his brandy and I observed a perceptible trembling of his hand. "And the damnable thing is, he always seems to know precisely what we need. Just last year the wife and I were

discussing the possibility of buying a new side table for our dining room and what did we find on the 25th upon arising but that very thing!"

"The fiend!" I muttered, scarcely able to believe the story I was hearing.

Holmes ignored my outburst and leaned forward as he questioned Clarkwell further. "Surely you've attempted some measures to halt this phenomenon?"

"Of course I have," replied Clarkwell, "but to no avail. Double locked windows and doors are no hindrance to this sort of man. Twice I took it into my head to stay up all night and capture him in the act, but although I doused all the lights and concealed myself skillfully he failed to show on both occasions."

"You mean to say," said Holmes, whose eyes were glittering excitedly under half-closed lids, "that he knows when you are sleeping and he knows when you're awake?"

"Yes," replied Clarkwell. "You put it well, Mr. Holmes. It seems there is little he doesn't know. The only clue I can give you is perhaps the most curious thing of all about this affair. Last year, while the wife was polishing up the new side table I took myself outside for a breath of fresh air and found to my surprise a fair sprinkling of snow on our front porch. I say this was curious, Mr. Holmes, for on the previous evening I had swept the porch clean and there had been no fresh snowfall during the night. A moment's reflection made it clear to me that this snow must have fallen from our roof and, intrigued and perhaps more than a bit suspicious, I immediately fetched a ladder and clambered up it.

"Well, Mr. Holmes," continued Clarkwell after a swallow of brandy had steadied his nerves, "I hope you will continue to regard me as a sane man when I relate to you what I found. I found footprints, sir."

"Footprints?" repeated Holmes. "A man's or a woman's?"

Clarkwell paused to glance at both of us in turn and his voice sank to a throaty whisper as he answered.

"Mr. Holmes, they were the footprints of a gigantic reindeer!"

I CANNOT ACCURATELY RECOUNT THE EFFECT CLARKwell's words had on us. An ominous silence filled the room and I felt the hairs on my neck fairly stand on end, as if an electric current had passed through my body. Clarkwell, whose features bore evidence of an almost paralytic fear, turned his eyes beseechingly to Holmes. "You must believe me!"

"Certainly I believe you, Mr. Clarkwell," replied Holmes in a soothing voice. "Is there anything else you wish to add?"

"No, nothing," answered Clarkwell, his unease fading rapidly under Holmes' studied calm. "That's all there is, as if that isn't enough. The wife, she's convinced we're under some ancient family curse. Mind you, I don't go for that nonsense, but I must admit I'm fairly well stumped. I only hope you can shed some light on this, Mr. Holmes. If you can't . . ." Clarkwell trailed off, and he suddenly seemed a very weary man.

"Have no fear, Mr. Clarkwell," Holmes reassured him. "I shall be delighted to look into your case. If Watson here will deign to lend me a hand I daresay we'll have some promising news for you by tomorrow."

"I'd be very grateful, Mr. Holmes," said Clarkwell as relief shone in his eyes. The two men stood up to shake hands and, after gathering his hat and coat, we soon heard Morgan Clarkwell's footsteps retreating ponderously down our stairs.

"I don't know about this, Holmes," I began as soon as we were alone. "It seems the work of a madman."

"You think so?" Holmes returned to his armchair and after repeated attempts managed to get his old briar-root pipe lit. "It is a singular thing, Watson, that Clarkwell should mention the 25th of December as the date of these occurrences. That's the very day when you invariably leave me a nicely wrapped gift, usually a tin of tobacco or some such thing."

"Surely you're mistaken, Holmes," I replied with a start. "It is you who leaves me something, a Clark Russell sea novel last year if I recall."

At my words, Holmes abandoned his speculative air and stared at me with a look that fairly froze the blood in my veins. "Good God, Watson, do you mean it wasn't you who left me the bow rosin for my violin last year?"

"Why no, Holmes," I replied with some confusion.

"And I've never bought you a Clark Russell sea novel in my life." Holmes slowly sank back into his armchair, but every fiber of his being was taut with excitement. "Deep waters, Watson," mused Holmes as he turned a somber eye towards me. "Deep waters, indeed."

I had scarcely time to collect my thoughts on the matter before Holmes had sprung out of his chair and quickly donned his cape and deerstalker. "Surely you're not venturing out in this weather?" I began.

"Action is what's called for Watson, and it's action that shall be taken. I have a fair idea what's behind all this, but one wire to Inspector Lestrade at Scotland Yard will make it all clear." And with that, he was gone.

HE RETURNED A SHORT TIME LATER IN A STATE OF GREAT excitement and nervously paced the length of our rooms again and again. "It's unthinkable," he muttered to himself from time to time, but I was unable to get any further response from him until, at length, a rap sounded at our door. Holmes sprang toward it like a man possessed and without a word grabbed the telegram from the delivery boy while handing him a tip that I saw to be clearly excessive. Holmes left the door agape as he feverishly ripped open the envelope and devoured its contents at a glance.

"Ha! Look at this, will you Watson?" beamed Holmes as he threw the wire towards me. "I thought as much!"

Picking the wire off the floor, I read:

Holmes,

Re your query. Have received many gifts on date indicated. Occasionally marked "From St. Nick." Woolly jumper last year.

Lestrade

"What does it all mean, Holmes?" I asked.

"It means, Watson, that this is more than the work of some idle philanthropist. Can you not see the pattern?"

I confessed that I could not.

"What have you and I and Clarkwell and Inspector Lestrade in common? We are all investigators or detectives of one sort or another." Holmes paused to re-light his briar, which had gone out again. "I sense a malignant presence behind all this, Watson. I believe the Professor is on the move again."

"Not Moriarty!" I exclaimed.

"Yes, Moriarty," replied Holmes through tight lips.

"But perhaps it's not what it seems, Holmes," I began as an idea flashed through my brain. "Perhaps after a year of crime and villainy he wishes to make amends of a sort to his pursuers. You yourself have remarked upon his perverse personality. I shouldn't be surprised if he finds something terribly amusing at the thought of giving his arch-foes year-end presents."

Holmes eyed me curiously for a moment before breaking into a delighted laugh. "Excellent, Watson! You have surveyed the evidence, applied known personality traits of the perpetrator and arrived at a highly probable solution. I'm gratified to see that my lessons of the past few years have not gone totally unheeded."

I was on the verge of uttering something modest and unassuming

when to my great chagrin Holmes continued speaking. "I'm afraid, however, that I don't agree with your theory, Watson, as it ignores the fact that the overriding characteristic of Moriarty's personality is a complete and total incapacity of any action even remotely good. I suspect a far more evil design."

I was eager to hear this theory, my own being so presumptively dismissed, but Holmes demurred. "Not now, Watson. The day's events have proved interesting thus far, but I fear there is little for us to do until later this evening. I suggest a bit of dinner at Simpson's over which I might give you my views on the case."

I HASTILY AGREED TO THIS MOST JUDICIOUS PLAN BY Holmes and it wasn't long before we were comfortably seated at Simpson's, a most palatable pair of beefsteaks set before us. Holmes lingered distractedly over his as he began talking.

"You must understand, Watson, that Moriarty is a man lost in evil. Every word he speaks, every action he takes, no matter how innocent it may appear, must be scrutinized closely. So we have his latest action, leaving annual gifts for the detectives of London. We must ask ourselves two questions. How does he do it? And why? Clarkwell mentioned reindeer footprints on his roof. What does that suggest to you, Watson?"

"I really couldn't say, Holmes," I replied.

"Come now, Watson," urged my friend. "Think! What sort of footprints would a reindeer leave?"

"Why, cloven hoofprints," I answered.

"Bravo, Watson!" said Holmes. "Cloven hoofprints indeed. When Clarkwell mentioned those, my thoughts turned immediately towards Moriarty. Cloven hoofprints clearly represent the Devil and on the rooftop means precisely that. The Devil, in this case personified by Moriarty, on top. Lestrade's wire clinched the matter when he mentioned that his gifts sometimes bore the message 'from St. Nick.' As you're no doubt aware Watson, 'Old Nick' has long been an alias for the Devil, much like Lucifer, or Beelzebub and Moriarty, somewhat carried away by the largesse of his gift giving, saw fit to amend 'Old Nick' to 'St. Nick.' "

"Wonderful, Holmes!" I exclaimed.

"The footprints on the roof also presented a method of entry that Clarkwell didn't think of, namely, the chimney."

"But, Holmes," I protested, "I can't imagine a man of the Professor's age and build clambering up and down a chimney."

"Nor can I," agreed my friend. "Instead, I envision two or three

highly trained monkeys completing the task. Moriarty has merely to attach replica cloven feet to the monkeys, give them the gifts, and send them on their way."

I stopped midway through my meal, momentarily sickened at the thought of so much genius being used to such an evil purpose. "But why, Holmes?" I asked.

"Why?" Holmes smiled thinly in reply. "The answer is obvious. Being detectives, we shall soon begin to question the origin of these gifts. Like Clarkwell, our only clue will be the cloven hoofprints left on our roof. What would your reaction be, Watson, if one of your fellow physicians should come to you with such a tale?"

"Why, I should say he was . . ." I stopped, and a tremor ran through me as I realized the implication of my next word. ". . . mad."

"Yes, Watson, insane," agreed Holmes. "As detectives, we serve an important public function. Oftentimes it is our testimony alone that either frees a man or consigns him to the gallows. The responsibility is so great, Watson, that men such as yourself, Clarkwell, Lestrade or I would surely remove ourselves from the public arena should we ever begin to doubt our sanity. Do I speak for you, Watson?"

"Why, certainly, Holmes!" I replied vigourously. "For the public safety if nothing else!"

"Precisely," nodded Holmes. "If, on the other hand, any of us should refuse to take this honourable course, I assure you we should only have to wait for one of Moriarty's cronies to be brought to trial and our secret would be shortly out. I imagine only a few questions from even the most unskilled barrister regarding these mysterious gifts would be enough to ruin any detective's credibility forever."

I PUSHED MY PLATE FROM ME AND SAT BACK IN MY chair, overwhelmed at the enormity of the scheme that Moriarty had embarked upon. Within a few years he would have laid to rest everyone who presented the least threat to him. It was a plan only a genius could have conceived. Or a madman.

As I pondered further, my mind began to reel at the possibilities, and it seemed for a moment as if the very corners of the universe were about to converge upon us. I started from my reverie as I felt Holmes' ice cold grip on my arm and I slowly raised my eyes to meet his steely gaze.

"Steady on, Watson," my friend's reassuring words came across the table. "We've found him out in time. I daresay it will be the Professor who's in for a surprise this year."

I was cheered enormously by Holmes' words and attacked my steak

with renewed fervor. London, I reflected, was surely fortunate to have a man such as Sherlock Holmes within its environs. After finishing our meal, we quickly made our way back to Baker Street with the aim of formulating a plan to lay the Professor by his heels that very evening. Upon entering our rooms, however, we both immediately shrank back towards the door at the sight of a tall, stooped figure that stood by our bay window, calmly observing the street below.

"Do come in, Holmes," said the figure. "I've been expecting you." As he slowly turned towards us, his high domed forehead gleamed faintly in the evening light and I shuddered involuntarily as I felt Holmes stiffen by my side.

"Moriarty," breathed Holmes, his voice low with menace.

"Very good, Holmes," rejoined Moriarty. "I'm comforted to see that you have lost none of your keen deductive faculties."

Holmes made no reply to this brazen insult even as I furtively patted my pocket for my service revolver and cursed its absence.

"Come now, gentlemen," continued Moriarty, "I won't have you standing ceremony for me, please make yourselves comfortable. Delightful quarters you have here, Holmes, although perhaps a trifle less immaculate than one would wish." As if to illustrate his point, Moriarty drew his finger across the windowsill and clucked disapprovingly at the dust it collected. Holmes and I had by now edged warily into the room, and the detective finally spoke to his arch-foe.

"Perhaps we'll have you around on one of your off days to clean up, Professor, since it excites your interest so." Moriarty's eyes merely glittered in reply and my friend continued, "What is it you want, Professor?"

"Want?" Moriarty raised his eyebrows slightly and his head began to slowly oscillate in that peculiar fashion of his that was more reptilian than human. "I wish information, Holmes. It has come to my attention that you are investigating the mysterious gift giving that takes place annually on the 25th of December."

"How do you know that?" asked Holmes.

"Come, come, Holmes," chided Moriarty, "you know my methods. Is what I hear true?"

"You know it is," replied Holmes. "The game is up Moriarty, or should I say 'St. Nick'?"

"Ah, I see. You suspect *me* of being 'St. Nick.' " The rapidity of Moriarty's head weaving increased, and his features struggled to contort themselves into something resembling a smile. "Holmes, this is too delicious. I must say I'm flattered that you consider me capable of a scheme of world-wide magnitude."

"World-wide?" echoed Holmes, a skeptical look on his face.

"Yes," continued Moriarty. "If you had but widened the scope of your investigation a trifle you would have discovered that this phenomenon is not confined to England. Every 25th of December households around the world are showered with gifts of every shape and form. Mind you," and here a furrow creased Moriarty's brow, "I myself have never once received anything, doubtless through some oversight. Still, the enormity of the task is worthy of admiration. Nearly ninety million homes are visited in a twenty-four hour period."

"And if not you, Professor, then who?" inquired Holmes.

"I wish I knew," replied Moriarty. "Like you, I've heard rumors of this 'St. Nick' but little else. The only other point of interest I've been able to unearth is that if the night he makes his rounds is an especially foggy one, a small red light can be seen moving over the city at tremendous speed. I'm afraid I can tell you little else."

"It's of no consequence," replied Holmes with some vehemence. "Just as you'll meet your end, Professor, so shall this 'St. Nick' meet his."

"You mean you intend to capture him?" The prospect of this seemed to please Moriarty greatly. "My dear Holmes, simple mathematics will inform you that if a man is capable of visiting ninety million homes within a twenty-four hour span, then he spends less than one thousandth of a second at each of them. And the great Sherlock Holmes is going to capture this man? Oh, it is wonderful, Holmes, simply wonderful!"

To my immense surprise, Moriarty then proceeded to twirl a complete circle in apparent delight, clapping his hands all the while. He followed this extraordinary performance with an obscene high-pitched giggle before moving suddenly towards the door and disappearing through it; his mocking cackle drifting back to us as he clattered noisily down the stairs. Holmes made no effort to stop the Professor, but instead turned towards the fire and gazed into it for some time in gloomy silence.

"Chin up, Holmes," I ventured at last with a forced show of cheer. "Perhaps the Professor's still having us on."

Holmes never moved his eyes from the fire as he spoke in a calm voice. "No, Watson, the Professor is many things, but he is not fool enough to regale me with such a tale in my own home were it not the truth. He was gloating, Watson. Gloating. This 'St. Nick' undoubtedly exists and he is as much a mystery to Moriarty as he is to me."

HOLMES' DEPRESSION DEEPENED STEADILY THROUGH-

out the evening until he was far into one of his black moods. Picking up his violin and cradling it like a child, he began to play a haunting, melancholy air, and it was to these mournful strains that I eventually slipped into unconsciousness. It seemed I had hardly closed my eyes however, before I felt my shoulder being vigorously shaken and I awoke with a start to find Holmes' fine grey eyes a scant few inches from my own.

"Come, Watson," he said in a low but excited tone, "the game is afoot!"

Groggily, I stumbled to my feet and observed that it was nearly midnight.

"A man can take defeat lying down," Holmes was continuing, "or he can face what may come on his own two feet. We, Watson, shall stand to the last!"

"But, Holmes," I protested, "where are we going?"

"Up on the rooftop, quick, quick, quick," replied Holmes as he threw on his Inverness. "Then down through the chimney with 'St. Nick.' "

Following Holmes' lead, we travelled through the attic and edged out cautiously onto the roof through a skylight, which had been installed only the previous year. The footing was treacherous, a light snow aiding matters not in the least, but at length we both reached the chimney and paused in our exertions to regain our breath. Below us, London lay spread out like a vast faerie wonderland. Soft yellow lights twinkled in the distance while the newly fallen snow swathed the land in a blanket of beauty and innocence. The only sound was that of a single horse-drawn carriage moving slowly down the street in muffled cadence. After some minutes of this tranquil view I felt Holmes turn slightly towards me.

"What is it?" I whispered.

"There's a north wind coming," replied Holmes as he pointed in that direction.

I shifted my view to the north and felt only the faintest possible breeze caress my cheek. I was about to question Holmes on this point when I felt a single finger upon my lips and the question died in my throat. In a trice, the breeze had become a gust and as I glanced at Holmes, I saw his unblinking eyes staring into the inky night, for what, God only knew.

My heart had scarcely time to quicken before a sudden whirlwind swept down upon the city. Desperately, I sought to keep my balance on the slick tiles as the gale howled around us, sweeping my bowler from my head and sending it spinning down the street after the vortex.

Holmes, unmindful of his own safety, was flailing wildly at the air as if battling some unseen foe and his frenzied shouts were all but unintelligible. I gazed helplessly at my friend, wondering how I could aid him when with one final icy blast the storm suddenly left us. Silence fell quickly, the only sound the ragged breathing of Holmes and myself, but in my delirium I imagined I could hear the wind mocking our futile efforts, the words "Ho-Ho-Ho" sounding vaguely to my ears.

The light dusting of snow that had blown up slowly settled upon us, and as I struggled to regain my equilibrium I saw Holmes sagging nearby on the chimney, a pain-stricken look on his face.

"I have failed, Watson," his voice was barely audible. "Failed utterly."

These words from the great detective brought an uncontrollable lump to my throat and I was only glad at that moment that I shared the rooftop with Holmes. Knowing his abrupt mood swings, I moved slowly to brace myself against the chimney and prepared for any sudden impulses my friend might give in to. How long we remained there, I know not, but my fears ultimately proved unfounded when I felt Holmes lay a tired hand on my shoulder.

"Come, Watson," he said. "Let's go home."

We carefully retraced our steps and as we entered our rooms, each wrapped in his own thoughts, we both froze with surprise at the appearance of two gaily wrapped gifts on our mantelpiece. A mutual nod was enough to send us moving quickly towards them and a moment later. Holmes stood with a new briar and I with a new bowler. I could see that Holmes was greatly pleased, as was I, and I gingerly placed the bowler upon my head. It fit perfectly.

"You know, Holmes," I began as I studied my profile in the mirror, "perhaps you shouldn't take your failure in this case quite so harshly."

"I daresay you're right, Watson," replied Holmes as he lit his new pipe with a twinkle in his eye. "Indeed, I'm beginning to think that some things best remain mysteries after all." ●

NEXT MONTH

Mike Shayne returns in another thrilling adventure.

DON'T MISS IT!

Was it mere thoughtlessness, or criminal negligence—or something much worse?

The Cold Woods

by JOSEPH PAYNE BRENNAN

THE WIND THAT WINTER AFTERNOON SEEMED EDGED with ice, as if it were blowing straight off arctic wastes. It swept across the frozen snowdrifts with unremitting persistence.

Old Dave Baines, patriarch and retired postmaster of the village of Juniper Hill, shivered in spite of his heavy pull-over as he dropped a last armload of split pine into the kitchen woodbox and closed the shed door.

For convenience, the woodshed was built attached to the kitchen but it was not heated.

Old Dave hunkered up to the glowing stove, grateful for its warmth. As he spread his numb hands above the stove lids, he reflected that, years ago, he might have gone out hunting, or perhaps just for a walk, without a thought about the freezing wind.

Well, blood thins and old bones grow brittle. Those days were over.

When the stove's warmth had driven out the woodshed-induced chill, he walked to the rear window and stood looking out across the empty snow-covered field, which stretched to a dark line of hemlocks in the distance.

The wind was so lethal, the cold so intense, that nothing moved, not a single snowshoe rabbit nor a solitary foraging crow. Even the irrepressible chickadees had sought cover.

He was about to leave the window when he noticed movement far across the field. Someone had stepped from the shadows of the hemlocks and started across the snow-smothered lot. Whoever it was advanced slowly, pausing now and again to rest.

Old Dave watched, his curiosity aroused. The man was obviously not a hunter; he carried neither rifle nor shotgun. And who would walk in this frigid wind for pleasure or exercise?

The figure was halfway across the field before Baines recognized him. Oliver Kroff. Thirty-two. Failed farmer, odd-job man. Presently boarding at the Shelwin place. A good man, hard-working, but always, it seemed, dragged back by indifferent luck.

DAVE HAD THE BACK DOOR OPEN BY THE TIME OLIVER reached it. He held it wide. "You look plumb froze through, Oliver! Get up by the stove. I'll brew some hot tea."

Oliver Kroff accepted the invitation with alacrity. He bent over the stove, shivering and wordless, while Dave busied himself with the tea kettle.

Several minutes passed before Kroff spoke. He looked up and grimaced. "Felt like my mouth was froze shut! Coldest day I remember!"

Dave set two cups on the kitchen table. "Must be cold in those woods. What's out there that couldn't wait?"

"Harv and me was cuttin' wood way down in the State Lot. Cold wasn't so bad, working'." Oliver was still shivering.

Dave looked up, startled. "Where's Harvey?"

"He's down there, Dave. Twisted his ankle. Maybe broke. Couldn't walk on it. I come out fer help."

Dave set the kettle back down. "He'll freeze to death, Ollie! You shouldn't have left him!"

Oliver shook his head. "Ole shack down there. Logger's place, I guess. I got him in there. Has a bunk and stove. I got a good fire goin'. Left plenty wood. He'll get awful hungry, maybe, but he won't freeze."

Frowning, Dave glanced out the window. Shadows were already falling over the wind-scoured drifts. "Too late for a rescue party tonight," he observed. "Probably get lost in those woods. Must be seven miles to that logger's shack."

Moving with reluctance from the glowing stove, Oliver sat down at

the table. "Almost eight miles, I calc'late. No use tonight. We'll get Harv out first thing, come mornin'. Take a sled. Need three, four men, likely."

When the tea was brewed, Dave filled the cups and sat down. He was worried. Harvey Laton was a sturdy young man—younger than Oliver—but a night alone in a ramshackle logger's cabin, nursing an injured ankle, without food or blankets, would be a trying ordeal for anyone.

"I don't imagine," Dave commented, "that shack is exactly airtight, Oliver."

"Leaks," Oliver conceded. "Leaks plenty. But the window's not broke and the door still shuts."

Dave sipped his tea. "You took no grub at all?"

Oliver shrugged. "Had a choclit bar I left. Harv had some chewin' gum."

Slim fare, Dave reflected, for a freezing winter's night.

Getting up, he refilled Oliver's cup. "We'd better not wait till morning, Oliver, to round up a rescue squad. You ask around in the village on your way home—once you get thawed out. Tell everybody to meet here, soon as it's daylight. I think five or six in the party would be best."

Oliver nodded, gulping down more tea. He had unbuttoned his thick wool jacket and loosened the wool scarf wound around his neck. His plaid hunter's cap, complete with ear-flaps, lay on the table.

He got up, finally, and put on his cap. "Thanks for the tea, Mr. Baines. I better get movin' on and round up some help in the village. Daylight tomorrow." He moved toward the door.

Dave pointed toward the adjacent living room. "Go out the front way. Shorter."

He held the door as the younger man edged into the wind.

"Miss Shelwin hold supper for you, Oliver?

Oliver shivered as the blast of icy air struck him. "She better. I'm starved clean through."

"Not half as starved as Harvey will be before morning," Dave thought to himself as he closed the door.

After a big bowl of warmed-over lamb stew, he washed the dishes and then sat by the kitchen stove. Well fed and comfortably warm, he felt guilty as he thought of Harvey Laton limping around a drafty logger's shack with nothing but a chocolate bar to nibble on.

He went to bed early but had trouble falling asleep. Harvey, actually a first cousin to Oliver Kroff, was in his mid twenties, robust and strong as the proverbial ox. So far as Dave could remember, he had

never been sick in his life. There was nothing to worry about, he assured himself. In the morning the search party would find him no worse for his night's ordeal, save for a badly-swollen ankle and a ravenous appetite.

HE GOT UP BEFORE FIVE. THE FARMHOUSE WAS ICY; HE dressed hastily. He nursed the few embers left in the kitchen stove with kindling and pieces of birch bark and then put in several smaller sticks of pine. By the time he was ready for breakfast, the chill had left the kitchen.

After oatmeal, warm cornbread, two eggs and coffee, he cleared up and walked to the window.

The outside thermometer read twelve below, but at least the scouring wind had died away. When the sun came up, the temperature might gradually get as high as ten.

Daylight was little more than a promise when he heard the sound of footsteps on the front porch.

When he opened the door, Ira Marn, Wesley Carville and Jack Conway tramped inside.

Dave shut the door, frowning. "Where's Oliver?"

Crowding into the kitchen, the men made for the stove.

Jake held his gloved hands over the iron stove lids. "I guess Oliver caught a bad chill comin' in through those woods yesterday. Says he's got a fever. He was still in bed when we went to Miss Shelwin's place. We figured he'd best not go."

Pausing in the kitchen doorway, Dave rubbed his chin reflectively. "Won't be easy draggin' Harvey out on a sled through those woods. I figured you'd have four in the party."

Ira Marn shrugged. "Oliver says he asked almost everybody in the village. Jason Brown's over at Granville on business; Jim Stoke's ailing—rheumatiz, I guess; Henry Franville's wife pretty sick and—I don't know. There's nobody much else around not too old or too young—or too puny."

"Too bad," Dave replied absently. Walking to the stove, he lifted the coffee pot.

"Five, six cups left in here. How about it? Won't take long. Might as well wait till the light hits into those woods. Be rough even then."

He got cups from the shelf and the men sat down.

Although he'd had his quota of coffee, Baines sat down himself and sipped a little more for sociability's sake.

"I figured there'd be four," he repeated. "Two-man relays."

Wesley Carville set down his half-empty cup. "Ahhh, good java,

Dave." He looked across at the older man. "Don't worry, we'll make out all right. The third man can walk ahead and then relieve one of the other two at intervals."

"A four-man crew would be better," Dave replied stubbornly. "You'd have two to take over at the same time. It's certain one man alone can't pull that sled—at least not for long. And one tired man on the traces puts a big burden on the other."

"Guess you're right, Dave, but we'll manage," Ira Marn commented. "Too bad," he added, "we couldn't round up a team of huskies!"

Dave stood up suddenly. "I'm goin' along."

The three men glanced at one another.

"Awful cold out there," Jake Conway ventured.

Wesley Carville shook his head. "It's a long way through those woods, Dave."

Dave was already pulling extra sweaters and his big corduroy coat off the rack. "No use arguin'. I can be a guide anyway. I know those woods pretty well. I'll bet not a one of you've been down to that State Lot in years."

Jake Conway finished his coffee and pushed back his chair. "That's so, Dave. I know I ain't been there since the town took it over."

The State Lot, originally owned by the State, had been ceded to the town years before but still retained its former name. For a small fee, paid to the township of Juniper Hill, wood-cutting by residents was permitted.

Dave followed the three men out the front door. The air was so bitter it seemed to possess an acrid tang. But the windstorm of the previous day had blown itself out. Everything was frozen and motionless.

A long low sled with gleaming steel runners leaned against the porch rails. Wesley Carville took the tow rope and the party went around the house and started across the rear field.

THE MEN MOVED QUICKLY BUT WITH DELIBERATION. NO one spoke until they slipped into the half-darkness under the snow-burdened hemlocks.

"Sure has grown up since I was in here last," Jake Conway observed.

Frowning, Ira Marn peered ahead. "I guess it's just as well you came along, Dave. Otherwise the three of us might get lost in here."

Dave Baines nodded. "I tramp around here quite a lot before cold weather sets in. Easy to get turned the wrong way if you don't know some landmarks."

They stopped occasionally to rest briefly. On one such occasion Ira Marn passed around a flask of whiskey, which he had thoughtfully stowed in one of his capacious coat pockets.

As the sun came up and light strengthened, the temperature rose a few degrees, but the cold was still intense.

Nearly two hours passed before they finally reached the cut-over area of the State Lot.

Dave, on familiar ground, led them unerringly toward the decrepit logger's cabin that Oliver had described.

"Don't see any smoke comin' from the chimmy," Conway remarked as they approached the shabby structure.

Dave Baines hurried ahead and pushed open the cabin door. It was dark inside, dark and bitterly cold.

"Harv?" he called, as his eyes slowly adjusted to the shadows. The other three crowded in behind him.

There was no reply, no sound of movement.

"Must be asleep," Marn muttered.

Baines crossed to the single bunk set against the opposite side of the cabin wall. He stared down.

Harvey Laton lay there, face up, his open eyes seemingly fixed on the unfinished log ceiling.

Baines knew death when he saw it; nevertheless, he bent down and felt for a heart beat. There was none.

His deft hands quickly inspected the still figure. He straightened up. "Froze to death. Stiff as a pine plank."

Ira Marn shook his head. "Fell asleep and let the fire go out."

Jake Conway scowled. "Not like Harv."

Wesley Carville shrugged. "Wore out probably. And then with a wrenched ankle, maybe broke."

Conway glanced across the cabin. "Woodbox full up."

Ira Marn stared at it reflectively. "Full up, but it must have hurt like blazes to drag along on a busted foot and fill up that stove."

Dave walked over, lifted one of the stovelids and looked in. "Four big sticks, scorched a little but not much more."

He moved to the woodbox and felt along the top of the stacked lengths of pine, cedar and maple.

He shook his head. "Wet. That's why it didn't burn."

He looked up toward the log ceiling. "I don't see daylight, but maybe moisture seeps through."

He went on feeling the lengths of stacked wood. Starting at the top, two-thirds of the pile was damp.

"Ollie should have stayed with him!" Jake Conway exclaimed

suddenly, angrily.

Carville stared at him, surprised at his anger. "Maybe, Jake. And maybe not. There might be two corpses here instead of one."

Conway was about to reply when Marn called from a corner of the cabin. "Roof sure leaks over here. Floor's wet through."

Dave Baines strode to the corner and inspected the ceiling. He could see daylight between some of the logs. Lowering his head, he scrutinized the bark-and-splinter littered floor. It was soaked.

Marn walked toward the door. "Wesley's right. Ollie was lucky to get out alive himself. If he'd stayed, they'd both be gone."

Dave Baines shivered. Suddenly it seemed colder inside the cabin than out. "Well, we'd better get started," he suggested.

The trek back through the freezing pine forest with the body of Harvey Laton lashed to the long sled was a somber and uncomfortable ordeal. Dave Baines felt his age at every step. The trip seemed endless. Dave acted as guide, tramping ahead of the two men who pulled the sled. At intervals, the third man relieved one of the other two on the tow rope.

The grim procession paused occasionally but only briefly. No one wanted to prolong the tiresome and depressing hike back.

Chilled to the bone, and all but exhausted, Dave watched from his porch as the three men continued on into the village.

LONG BEFORE HARVEY LATON'S FUNERAL, OPINION IN Juniper Hill had polarized into opposing camps. One held that Oliver Kroff had been thoughtless, if not criminally negligent, and ought to be held responsible for Laton's death. The other camp held him blameless; this group said he deserved not condemnation but sympathy.

Oliver, ordinarily loquacious, attended the obsequies in a state of moddy silence, subdued and even sullen.

As it turned out however, Laton's death appeared to be the low point in Oliver's career. A few months later, his elderly uncle, Calvin Sellers, ailing for years, expired, leaving Oliver not only his chattels but his sturdy farmhouse and the fertile fields surrounding it.

There were, of course, persons in Juniper Hill who insisted on pointing out that Oliver and Harvey were cousins and that undoubtedly Calvin Sellers would have divided his possessions and property between them, if Harvey had still been alive. On probate, it was revealed that these rumor mongers were correct. Sellers had, in fact, left his goods, house and land to his two nephews jointly, "or in the event of the demise of either of them, to the surviving one."

The circumstances surrounding Harvey Laton's death were again

resurrected and hotly debated.

More than one native of Juniper Hill trudged out to old Dave Baines' place to get, firsthand, his respected opinion. Dave, however, remained unshakably noncommittal.

Oliver himself refused to discuss the matter, relapsing into angry silence if the subject was even hinted at in his presence.

It seemed that Oliver's luck had finally turned. He "took hold" out at his deceased uncle's farm. The place had been neglected during Seller's lingering illness, but Oliver toiled from sunrise till twilight, plowing, planting, fertilizing, mending fence, cleaning the spring. It looked as if the Seller place had set Oliver on a prosperous path at last.

NEARLY A YEAR PASSED, AND THEN ONE CHILLY WINTER'S day, a neighbor delivering some cordwood to the old Seller farm discovered that Oliver was not to be found. Disgruntled, he dumped the load outside the woodshed and left. Later that day, he told his cronies in the general store at Juniper Hill that he'd have helped Oliver stack the wood in the shed but "I was goll-darned if I was goin' to do it all alone."

Nobody thought much about it until two days later when Jim Redmon passed the Seller farm on his way to the village. There had been flurries during the night and Jim reported that the cordwood was still heaped outside the shed, covered over with snow.

Caleb Hodge, who was constable, drove out to the Seller place to take a look. He entered through an unlocked rear door, searched the house from attic to cellar and found nothing. Everything was in order. The nearby barn and sheds were empty. Oliver had disappeared.

When the search party stopped at old Dave Baines' place, he assured them that he had not seen Oliver for weeks, but he invited them in for coffee. They had already tramped around for miles and the temperature was dropping.

While they were resting, sipping hot coffee and debating where they should look next, Dave strolled to the wall calendar in the kitchen and checked the date.

He stood staring at the calendar for so long that the room finally grew silent. When he finally turned, everyone was watching him.

"It's a long tramp through cold woods," he told them, "but you might take a look in that old logger's cabin down on the State Lot."

In the silence, everyone glanced at one another, an impossible surmise stalking their perimeters of thought.

Constable Hodge stood up. He spoke quietly. "I know the State Lot pretty well, boys. Let's get started."

Darkness was already closing on the woods before they got back. Constable Hodge knocked on Dave's door as the others waited.

Lamplight fell on their tired faces as Dave opened the door.

"How did you know?" Hodge asked the old man.

"Wasn't hard to figure, Caleb. Four days ago it was exactly a year since Oliver left Harvey in that cabin." His eyes met the constable's. "How did he—go?"

Caleb Hodge grimaced. "Sat down on the bunk and held a short-barreled shotgun against his head. Hell-awful mess."

He seemed to sag with weariness as he turned away. Just beyond the arc of lamplight he paused and looked back. "We'll get him out with a sled tomorrow, Dave."

BAINES, ALONG WITH MOST OF JUNIPER HILL, ATTENDED Oliver Kroff's funeral. It was a subdued and solemn affair. A division of opinion still persisted. One side said that Oliver's suicide proved his guilt; the other pointed out that unfounded accusations and unending rumors induced periods of brooding and finally drove an innocent man, dogged by bad luck most of his life, to a final desperate act.

Dave Baines had nothing to say, but after the obsequies he invited Ira Marn, Wesley Carville and Jake Conway back to his place for coffee.

The cemetery had been wind-swept and frigid. As his three guests sat down at the kitchen table, Dave walked to the cupboard and took out a bottle of brandy.

"On a day and at a time like this," he said, setting the brandy on the table, "coffee needs a little backbone."

The four of them sipped the brandy-laced coffee gratefully. The beverage was hot and the kitchen was warm. Gradually, they all relaxed.

At length Dave broke the silence. "I haven't said much—not anything I guess—about Oliver's guilt or innocence. Nothing could ever be proved, one way or another, but if I have your word that what I say now won't ever be repeated, I'll give you my considered verdict."

The three men nodded and Wesley Carville spoke for all of them. "What you say won't leave this room, Dave."

Thoughtfully, Dave set down his cup. "You three were with me when we found Harvey Laton frozen to death in that bunk. It appeared accidental: in pain—probably severe pain—with a fractured ankle, it looked as if Harvey had simply neglected the fire. If he'd nursed it carefully, maybe even with wet wood, it might have stayed. But every step he took was probably agony. The trip from the bunk to the stove must have been excruciating. Harv, I think, had finally lain down

exhausted, feverish as well, hungry and thirsty, fallen asleep—and frozen to death."

He poured a few more drops of brandy into his coffee and went on. "So far, so good. But I observed several things. One: the sticks of firewood in the box were dry near the bottom but wet on top and over halfway down. Two: there was no visible leak over the woodbox but there was a bad roof leak in another corner of the cabin. The floor was soaked there. Also, that area was littered with bits of wood and bark. There had been a pile of wet wood stacked on that floor."

Jake Conway gasped. "You mean Oliver deliberately—?"

Dave nodded. "'Fraid so, Jake. There was enough dry wood in the box to keep the fire going through the night. Oliver knew that. He also knew that Harv was in pain and might not pay too much attention to what he was doing. Under the pretense of trying to help, Oliver moved that whole stack of wet wood, piled it onto the dry sticks already in the box. He gambled it would put the fire out in short order once he was gone. Harv's main impulse would be to lie down and take the weight off his throbbing ankle. Even if he noticed the wood was wet, he'd likely find it unbearable, with his ankle, to shift over half of that heavy stack, to get at the dry wood underneath. Of course he tried to keep the fire going as well as he could with some wet sticks on the top—you saw them, scorched a little—lying in the stove when I lifted the lid.'"

Ira Marn shook his head. "Oliver did that so he'd inherit the whole of his uncle's estate?"

Dave sighed. "I think so, Ira. Otherwise he'd have to split with Harv. He probably knew—or surmised—the contents of old Seller's will. He was aware his uncle was ailing and he wanted the whole farm to himself. He was willing to murder to get it."

"You'd never get any court of law in the land to call it murder," Marn interposed. "Not even negligent manslaughter!"

"Of course not," Dave agreed. "I know that. Oliver knew it. But the law of the land isn't the only law. Oliver inherited the farm but he couldn't live with his guilt. That's why he walked back through those cold woods a few days ago—on the anniversary of Harv's death—sat down in the bunk where Harv had frozen to death, and blew most of his head off."

No one spoke until Wesley Carville reached for the bottle and poured more brandy.

"Somehow, I can't seem to get warm," he commented. ●

The subway stop was deserted. He was alone and waiting, afraid that the next person he saw would be someone he didn't want to see!

The Victim

by CARL HOFFMAN

A SUBWAY STOP ON A SUMMER MIDNIGHT. THE MERCiless glare of electric lights. The walls sweating.

Marve Whittier stands perspiring on the concrete platform, the smell of engine grease reeking in his nostrils. He glances quickly up and down the deserted station, a middle-aged man going to fat, his luxuriant gray hair sweeping up in a mounded pompadour his wife thinks is sexy. The pompadour is starting to dissolve in the heat and stickiness of this sweaty August night. Marve Whittier is frightened.

The station waits, deserted but for this single occupant. The tracks curve to a yellow signal light burning at the entrance to the tunnel. Thick electrical cables hum in the ceiling, between the rails. A sign reading UNION CENTER hangs on the smudged tile wall.

Marve Whittier is afraid. For the past week, the city has endured a heat wave that has sent temperatures rocketing daily into the 90's, with humidity to match. The heat has prompted a wave of violence—murder and battery, robbery and family fights. Blood-splattered bodies leer from the paper each morning; violence simmers back of every wall, behind each sweating face. Only last night a policeman, a good one known for his courage and courtesy, was shot to death on a streetcorner for no better reason than that he happened to be there.

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Three nights ago a pair of old ladies waiting on a subway platform not far from where Marve now stands were robbed and butchered by a teenage gang. These stories and the other grim headlines from page one nibble at the corners of Marve Whittier's mind, swarming as relentlessly as the roaches he knows are breeding in the shadows at the tunnel's mouth. Marve is a man wearing good-quality beige slacks and a green-print Hawaiian sport shirt, carrying an expensive leather briefcase bound in brass and embossed in gold. In a union business office or on a terminal loading dock he would be at ease, in control. But he is out of place on a subway platform in the heart of a city on a sweltering August night. He is a man who dresses meticulously, ever mindful of the image he will project, a man painfully aware that at this hour, in this place, his image is VICTIM.

He peers up the tracks, seeking a headlight, the sound of an approaching train.

It's all Leo's fault, he thinks bitterly for the hundredth time in the last ten minutes. Yeah, it's all Leo's fault, and where is he now, the big mushbrain, where has he gone?

For Marve Whittier is not down here by chance. Under ordinary circumstances he'd be relaxing in front of the TV with a tinkling gin-and-tonic in his hand, listening to the central cooling system pump refrigerated air through his suburban home and maybe thinking about going to bed pretty soon. He's no thug, he's a businessman; only business could have brought him to this platform at this time of night, only the touchy situation at work, which he was hoping to solve by meeting with his boss Leo. It was Leo—Leo with his eccentric penchant for sudden meetings in odd places, his obsession for secrecy that sometimes makes Marve think he's working for the CIA—it was Leo who insisted on this meeting in a subway station at midnight. And it is Leo who is now fifteen minutes late for his own appointment.

Correction, sixteen minutes, thinks Marve as he consults his Swiss watch, and that makes up his mind. The next train that pulls into this station will have a new rider. It doesn't matter what Leo thinks; the reconciliation can be deferred. Marve has waited long enough.

HE LOOKS UP THE TRACKS. IT CAN'T BE LONG NOW. A p-a system whines endlessly, maddeningly. A drop from the slimy concrete ceiling smacks his cheek. The station waits in silence, glare, motionlessness, an outpost of the subterranean kingdom of the subway, where the things come out at night.

He thinks of the gangs fanning through the city at this moment, the squads of drug-crazed teenagers armed with chains and baseball bats,

willing to kill for a handful of change, for less than a handful. Spray-canned on the wall across from him are a pair of interlocking capital D's, painted in tandem. Innocent enough unless one knows, as Marve does, that they stand for the Dynamite Devils, the city's largest, most fearsome gang. He is on their turf.

So where's the train? Those lazy bums are always striking for higher pay, they could at least run their lousy railroad on time—

Footsteps sound at the top of the steps behind him. He stiffens, listening hard.

The footsteps belong to more than one person, scraping, stumbling down the concrete stairs, the footfalls echoing up and down the barren length of the station. Marve sidles behind a pillar, hiding himself, gaining time while he evaluates the situation. He is known as a shrewd business tactician, a tough veteran of hardball negotiations with trucks and small-time hoods, and his skills apply equally tonight. He won't show himself unless it's safe, and, above all, he won't let these people know he's afraid. A lifetime of no-holds in fighting has taught him this cardinal rule.

He can hear voices now too, slurred, drawling voices, and then the feet appear, pacing down the stairs, bright-colored slacks popping into sight, and then Marve relaxes because the newcomers are women. Cheap women, a pair of them, one heavy, one slight, but both dressed in gaudy discount house clothing, hung with dime store jewelry, the kind Marve Whittier wouldn't give his teenage daughter. Their voices rise in cackling laughter, but even drunk they swivel and preen as they walk, caricatures of eroticism, as if all their ideas of sensuality come from TV soap operas and midnight movies.

He steps out from behind the pillar and the women spot him at once, exchanging looks under their glittering silver eyeshadow. For a moment they hesitate, and then the slight one makes a sloppy attempt at straightening her shoulders and bends her path to brush by him.

Marve is repelled by the come-on; who does she think she is. When Marve wants women, he doesn't have to come to a subway stop underneath Union Center. He stares straight at the wall, lounging, ignoring her, the cloying stench of the engine grease clinging in his nose. As if he could be attracted to *her*. But the skin on the near side of his body prickles as she approaches. He is in alien territory, after all, out of his depth. He must tell himself to ignore her, to project a totally careless exterior.

"What's the time, handsome?"

He gives her a cold glare. "Don't ask me."

"But you've got such a big fine watch there."

"Beat it, sister. I don't need you."
She sniffs. "Don't mind me, Chubby."

She and her heavier companion drift past in a swirl of cologne. They stand talking and laughing at the far end of the platform, ignoring him. Their slow sugary voices float through the stifling air. Marve lets himself relax a bit. He slouches over to the bench and examines it for unpleasant substances. None.

He sits, sprawling loosely as if at ease. So far so good, but he can't let down his guard for a second. Outnumbering him as they do, they still might try an assault. He is on unfamiliar ground. He keeps them in sight from the corner of his eye, congratulating himself on the way he's handling a tough situation. Marve Whittier: never at a loss.

HE DOESN'T LET HIMSELF REACT VISIBLY WHEN SOMEONE else shows up. As the footsteps approach down the concrete stairs, Marve casts a careless glance over his shoulder and sees at once that he has nothing to fear from *this* newcomer, either. The women are drunk; the new man is blotto. Blasted, sauced, spiked. Graying, the guy is dressed in an olive army surplus trenchcoat on this sultry night. The cuffs of his ragged jeans are tattered and shredded. One of his scuffed combat boots is untied. He hoists a flat bottle wrapped in a brown paper bag and shuffles toward Marve's bench.

Trash, Marve thinks. Skid row trash.

He can smell the drunk before he sits down. The guy plants himself on the opposite end of the bench and hoists the bottle again. Apparently it is empty, for he squinches shut one eye and sights down the mouth, then tosses it away. He searches around with eyes veined and tracked with red. He spots Marve.

"Say partner, I was wondering—"

Marve swivels him an icy glare. "Yeah?"

"I was wondering, I was wondering . . ." The drunk trails off under the hard cold rancor of Marve's gaze. He looks away, begins to examine the dark splotches of chewing gum mottling the concrete surface of the platform.

Marve looks up the track in satisfaction, pleased with his performance. Still keeping cool. The wino saw in his eyes there was no handout coming from *this* mark. Take the begging someplace else. It's so simple, really, Marve tells himself. Personality is all that counts. Keep your head and you can dominate a hundred of these two-legged roaches.

Now Marve is gaining confidence, almost at ease on his bench in the subway station with the walls trickling moisture and the lights blazing

down. The fear is dissolving; now he feels only minor irritation at the lateness of the train. He surveys the little patch of concrete he has claimed for his own. The drunk is slouched over, his head on his knees, arms wrapped around it. The two women are at the end of the platform, passing a cigarette back and forth. The minutes tick past. The electrical wires hum.

THEN THERE ARE MORE FOOTSTEPS AT THE TOP OF THE stairs, and Marve looks up, expecting more derelicts, or perhaps swing-shift factory workers on their way home. But he is wrong. For there are three pairs of legs popping into view, and even at first glance it's plain they belong to children, boys, toughs fourteen or fifteen years old, the kind who have been terrorizing the city during the heatwave, and Marve feels a jet of cold adrenaline pumping into his system as the youngsters reach the bottom of the steps and jump—one, two, three—over the turnstile. The first pair could almost be twins, stumpy boys whose arm muscles bulge from the sleeves of gaudy tee shirts emblazoned with the names of rock groups. Their heads are round and close-cropped, their eyes quick, sly, knowing. They walk in rhythm, shuffling along, swinging their arms to a silent beat; as they come opposite the bench they dance a perfect circle around each other, a soulful do-si-do. Their companion trails behind, dressed in cut-off shorts. He is taller and thinner, more languid, with huge round eyes, quietly singing some popular song in a trilling falsetto. But over his shoulder, quite casually, is draped a three-foot length of closet pole.

Marve rises instinctively as soon as the trio has passed him. Better to face this on his feet. But first he will make himself as inconspicuous as possible. That may buy him enough time for a train to show up. He strolls casually to a pillar at the far end of the platform and plants himself with his back to it, grasping his briefcase firmly, ready for use as a shield or bludgeon. Again he feigns carelessness, lazily surveying the brightly-lit station.

But at first the boys ignore him. The thin one stands in the open space behind the bench, slashing and whirling his yard-long club with both hands as though fighting an invisible opponent. The others dance down the platform toward where the women are passing their cigarette. They say something.

The heavy woman turns and looks at them scornfully from under her thick eyeshadow. "Go away, little boys."

She says it so distinctly, so contemptuously, that Marve can hear her even this far away. Unfazed, the youngsters begin a leisurely dance back in Marve's direction, but he must grant the heavy woman a por-

tion of respect. Personality: she knows how to use it too.

NOW THE THIN BOY HAS TIRED OF SHADOWERFIGHTING and wants to take on a living opponent. He jabs the sleeping drunk with his length of wood. When there is no response, he does it again. "Get up, old man. Come on."

The derelict snorts and rouses himself with an effort. "Huh? What you say?"

"Is get up and dance. You heard me good and well."

"Dance, haw. I can't dance."

"Sure you can. I saw you dance on the street corner. Corner of Euclid and East 55th."

"You never. I ain't been down there for a month."

"Yes, I did." The boy prods him harder with the stick, again. "I saw you last week. Now get up and do it."

"I tell you I can't."

"Can too."

"Can not." The drunk reclines on the bench, losing interest, looking around.

His passivity infuriates the boy. "Come on, gramps." Jabbing again.

The derelict waves him off. "Leave me be."

"ALL RIGHT—" The boy's eyes bulge. He swings the closet pole like a baseball bat, with a speed that dazzles Marve Whittier, cracking the wino across the kneecaps so that the subway station resounds to his howl—"you sure can't dance *now*. Not for a couple days at least."

The derelict has slumped to the concrete, holding his knees and whining.

The boy stands over him, gesticulating and shouting, "No dance, no way, uh-uh, you stupid bug-eating old man—"

The boy stops ranting abruptly, looks around. Everyone on the platform is staring at him.

He shrugs as if embarrassed, cracks a surprisingly sweet and childish grin. He is almost sheepish. At his feet the drunk is attempting to pull himself onto the bench; discovering he can't, the wino starts a slow crawl for the steps, dragging himself a foot at a time, keening in his throat. The thin boy glances at him, then turns away, giggling a little to himself as if he can't believe that he has wrought such harm. Shaking their heads, the dancing twins resume their *pas-de-deux*: the women go back to passing the cigarette. Incident closed.

FOR A MOMENT, THE GRINNING BOY'S LOOK FALLS ON

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Marve Whittier. Marve scowls back, but the boy doesn't notice. Then a curious screen drops over the youngster's eyes. He hefts the club and begins practice again, absorbed in his own movements. The length of wood flashes and whirls, so quick it is almost invisible. The boy chants under his breath, slowly gaining volume, so that in a moment Marve can hear him:

"Sam-rye. Sam-rye."

Over and over he chants, lost in his fantasy of battle with an imaginary swordsman, and it takes Marve a second or two to figure out what is going on. Then he realizes: *samurai*. From some oddball amalgam of TV movies and martial arts films, the boy has constructed a world in which he strides forth with the purity and heroism of a Japanese knight. *The crazy kid*, Marve thinks. *The dumb crazy kid*.

It is only then that Marve realizes that the dumb crazy kid is getting close. All this time the youngster has been slowly working his way toward him, absorbed in the cut and parry of his swordplay, the thrust and withdraw. Marve too has almost fallen under the spell of the slashing pole, but abruptly it is only a few feet away; he can almost feel its rush of air. And there is more. Beyond the samurai are the dancing twins, one on each side of the platform, bopping and snapping their fingers as they strut toward him. They are spread out behind the thin boy like the trailing edges of an arrowhead. An arrowhead that is aimed at Marve Whittier.

"Sam-rye. Sam-rye."

He watches uneasily, not sure if they are getting set for an attack or merely playing around. He has seen no signal, no gestures or nodding heads; then it occurs to him that perhaps they rehearse this, communicating with each other by the way they dance, the way they shuffle their feet. The stumpy twins are still relatively distant, thirty feet perhaps, but moving nearer steadily, and the samurai is so close that now Marve can feel the wind of the club as it whips through the sodden air. He imagines the sickening thud it would make smacking his shoulder, his skull, and casts a look at the set features of the thin boy, who seems totally hypnotized in his exotic quest. "Sam-rye. Sam-rye. Sam-rye." A quick glance over his shoulder tells Marve there are only a few feet of platform beyond the spot where he stands, and now the boy is very close, whirling the club with total intensity, and Marve can't help it, he flinches away.

THE SPELL IS BROKEN; THE BOY LOOKS UP, HIS EYES PASSING blankly across Marve's face, his concentration interrupted, and Marve takes this as a signal and hurls himself at the lad, dodging in

under the whirling club and battering the youngster with his heavy briefcase. Though tall and quick, the samurai is surprisingly frail, his half-developed muscles those of an adolescent, and he is no match for the fat white man with the thick gray hair who knocks him to the ground and kicks his ribs for good measure. The boy's shriek cuts through the humid atmosphere; the club goes flying. In a second Marve Whittier has grasped the closet pole with both hands, gripping it like a warrior, and planted himself at the base of the pillar, glaring in turn from the face of one dancing twin to the other. "Come on, you little slimes. Come and get it."

The twins stop dead, twenty feet away. Stunned.

"Come and get it, kids. Come to papa."

The injured boy is crawling at Marve's feet, and the fat man boots him again to pre-empt a flank attack. The youngster rolls over and clutches his stomach, groaning. "Why you do that, man, how come?"

"Slimy little punk."

"I ain't done nothing. Nothing at all."

"Tell me about it and you'll get some more." He feints toward the kid, who scuttles away, clutching his belly.

Marve stares down the stumpy twins. They are frozen, watching him with a kind of puzzled awe. "Get moving, you punks. Show me how fast you can run."

One of the twins makes an involuntary motion in the direction of the steps, then hesitates, and Marve raises the club, roaring, "GET MOVING, YOU SLIMY LITTLE ROACHES!" and both dancing twins break for the steps, vaulting the turnstile. Even the samurai manages to scramble to his feet and run bent over toward the exit. "MOVE OUT, YOU SWEATY PUNKS!" and now they are all three disappearing up the steps, Marve jogging in leisurely pursuit. He chases them to the barrier, then stops, swinging the club a few times. He likes the way it whistles as it slices the thick air. He feels as if he's just vanquished the playground bully.

Down the platform, the women are glaring at him. The wino is seated on the floor near the turnstile, clutching his knees, sweating. "Good job, mister."

Marve chuckles a little. "I do my best." He swings the club one last time, then stoops to help the wino to the bench.

FINALLY THE TRAIN COMES. MARVE HEARS A RUMBLE and the squeal of axles, and the headlight stabs out of the darkness of the tunnel. He walks quickly to where he has left his briefcase; the women are finishing their cigarette, getting ready to board the train.

The wino staggers after them as they mount the steps into the car. Marve is last in line and about to follow when he hears a voice behind him:

"Mr. Whittier! Mr. Whittier!"

Turning, he spots a young man of perhaps twenty-five who seems vaguely familiar and is just reaching the bottom of the steps.

"Mr. Whittier!"

Marve places him at last. Leo's-nephew. "What say, Chuckie."

The train is about to leave, and the motorman leans through his window and says something to Marve; he waves him on, then strolls over to meet Chuckie at the turnstile. Behind him the train pulls out. "What brings you down here this hour of the night?"

"Leo sent me." The kid is panting, his face running perspiration. "Said he was sorry about not being able to make it himself."

"What's got the old man? Arthritis? Senility?"

"Summer cold or something, all this air conditioning. Going in and out all the time."

"A guy gets as old as Leo, he should start thinking about retirement." Marve looks at the kid meaningfully. "Get what I'm saying?"

"Yeah, sure. Sorry if you had to wait too long. Where'd you get that thing?"

He is gesturing toward the length of closet pole. Marve realizes he's had it in his hand all this time. He chuckles. "Prize of battle. Some punks got out of line and I had to take it away from one of them."

"No joke. How many?"

"Three. I chased them right out of the station. Runny-nosed punks."

"No joke, no joke." Chuckie is shaking his head sympathetically, appreciatively, running his fingers over the rough surface of the club. "Plenty punks lately been kicking up trouble. You were taking a chance."

"I been at it a long time, Chuckie. I know how to handle myself in a situation."

The young man leans on the club as if it was a cane. "Oh, by the way, Leo gave me a message for you."

"Yeah? What's that?" Marve is still chuckling, savoring his triumph. "What's the old bird got to say for himself."

"Well—" Chuckie looks up and down the tracks. The station is deserted. "He wanted me to tell you—"

"Yeah, what?"

"You're fired."

Chuckie's hand comes up like lightning, filled with a huge black pistol, which he points at Marve Whittier's head. Marve barely has time to lurch a step backward and mouth the word "No!" when the white-tile walls echo the sustained roar of five closely-spaced shots. There is a pause, then one shot more. Ears ringing, Chuckie wipes the gun with a handkerchief and tosses it onto the subway tracks, where it bounces off the third rail, sparking and spitting. The length of closet pole rolls across the platform. Unhurried, almost casual, Chuckie leaves the station.

Once again all is quiet as the stop awaits the next train. The walls sweat. Motionlessness. Glare. Silence.

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Sure, he was a wino, but he had a rare talent: he could remember everything—except what he really wanted to remember!

Mr. Memory

by STEWART STREET

THE CITY WAS A HUMID, MALODOROUS BAKE-OVEN THAT afternoon. Milne had the two front windows of the unmarked sedan rolled down, but the residue of Santa Ana winds merely whipped through them as though borne on the bellows of Hell. Some wag in the city's public safety building was supposed to be collecting nickels and dimes to get one air-conditioning unit installed in one of the city's sedans, which would then be dealt out in a weekly lottery involving detectives, city inspectors and social service supervisors. They needed six-hundred bucks; they weren't going to make it this summer.

Milne's last official act that day was soothing and then pulling in a jumper from a ledge of the Highcourt Hotel. The jumper's wife and

son had been there, but had only made matters worse by encouraging him to leap. Unwittingly they had played into Milne's hands as a mediator. He had appealed to his jumper's sense of revenge; that by not giving in to familial taunts, he stood to gain a great deal. From a psychological standpoint, the wife and son had played it all wrong and Milne won out. He figured the odds to be around eight-to-five the man would someday find another building ledge; but tiny victories were still victories nonetheless.

Now, that ordeal and the heat and sapping humidity were coming together to turn him into a rag doll. He needed a drink or two. He was moving north, out of town, away from its only bonified cop-bar. Every town made it tough on a cop to get a drink. They made it difficult for you in neighborhood bars and taverns. The owners got edgy with you ensconced there, because your presence drove away business and gave the place a dark reputation. And customers, once they had you pegged, treated you like a man without a country. Cops generally died of thirst before they died from natural causes.

HE WAS DRIVING ON KELLUM STREET WHEN HIS EYE SPOTTED the Palm Tavern. The only palm tree in view was the one painted on the marquee, but the place advertised air-conditioning and the neighborhood was stable and so Milne pulled the steamy sedan to the curb, left it there without bothering to roll up the windows, and went inside.

The place wasn't likely to challenge any fire codes for being over-occupied. Two elderly women in loud, print dresses sat in conspiratorial closeness at one end of the bar. A young man stood with his feet glued to the floor in front of a Pac-Man video game, hoping against hope not to be eaten alive. The fourth and final customer in the tavern—not counting Milne—was an old man who sat muttering to himself alone at the bar. His drink was white port, a drunk's drink, the down-and-outer's champagne cocktail. Milne walked past him without a word, gave him a berth of five stools, captured the bartender's attention and ordered a vodka collins with plenty of ice. The place had a liquor license to dispense booze but it was definitely a beer bar.

The cool air wafting around him and the first few sips of his icy drink pushed the day's work and his jumper to the back edge of his consciousness. He had days-off coming to him and he had half-decided to take them. The extreme heat made his work dull. Criminals wilted in heat and froze their buns off in zero-cold, and criminals didn't like doing crimes in extreme temperatures in either direction. Milne long ago had discovered criminals to be lazy opportunists and largely seasonal workers. They could afford to pick and choose their victims

and they could afford to pick and choose their hours. Between cops and robbers, there had never been drawn up and signed anything remotely approaching a fairness doctrine.

A PAIR OF HARD-HAT LABORERS ENTERED FROM THE heat, their upper bodies and tank-tops glistening with an amalgam of sunburn, dirt and sweat. They ordered frosted bottles of beer and racked up the balls on the pool table. The oldtimer continued to mutter to himself hopelessly lost in some other sphere of existence. He seemed to be citing a crazed litany of statistics, but Milne was too far from him to hear and was thankful for the distance. His port had vanished and without a word the bartender filled his glass and swept some coins from the bartop in front of him.

As the bartender passed Milne on his way to the register, Milne let his eyes slide to his right, indicating the old man in a suspicious way.

"He's harmless," the bartender said to Milne. "Mr. Memory, we call him. His first name's Otto. Don't think I ever learned his last name. But then, first names are a way of life in a place like this. He moved into the neighborhood about ten years ago, a couple furnished rooms over on Dalrymple Street. He's from Tucson. Welfare recip, widower, keeps to himself. When he has too much port and begins to push the limits of his territory in here, I send him home."

"Why do you call him Mr. Memory?" Milne asked.

"He's sixty-eight and he doesn't forget a thing," the bartender told Milne. "I don't know what you call it. Total recall, absolute memory. But whatever name it goes by, Otto's got it."

He looked to Milne a lot like one of his old college history professors, a white-haired, wild-eyed relic who dabbled in revolution and taught Communist philosophy two nights a week in a cramped little room in the sub-basement of the Student Union. Since Milne entered the tavern, the old guy hadn't ceased chatting for an instant, likely testing his memory on himself for the sheer sport of it, fielding obscure questions and then dredging up answers that were just as obscure. Professor Blaplunk had died raving mad; Mr. Memory seemed a solid bet to suffer the same ignominious end.

Milne's thinking of Professor Blaplunk momentarily plunged him into reminiscences about his college days, some memories standing out as sharp and clear as photographs, others dim and vague as they darted and danced and evaded him behind the thick fog of years. Likely, Mr. Memory could recall what was in his first spoonful of baby food and what the spoon had looked like.

THE SPELL BROKE WHEN MILNE FELT HIS RIGHT FOREARM become constricted in the grip of a set of powerful fingers. The sweet, sickly stench of wine assaulted his nostrils. When Milne swung his head sideways, the florid, slightly maddened face of the old man was glaring back almost nose-to-nose.

"Memory, sir! Memory is all! The student does poorly at his school-work, the businessman loses a promotion or a big sale, the actor doesn't get the part. Stupidity? Time and circumstance? Fate? Nonsense! Memory, the capacity to retain! That intricate, delicate, elaborate honeycomb of brain cells that allow us humans to store and recall an almost infinite amount of data! The name of General Robert E. Lee's horse was Traveler, sir! We have had forty presidents, including the movie actor, yet only thirty-nine men have held the office of Chief Executive! Grover Cleveland served two nonconcurrent terms as the 22nd and 24th president! Memory, sir! It directs nearly all we do and think, nearly all, sir!"

Milne, after no little effort, finally managed to wrest his forearm free of the old man's strong grip. He caught the bartender frowning in his direction, but Milne gave him a slight shake of the head to indicate Mr. Memory was at present only a minor irritant and causing no real bother, so the bartender moved the old man's wine glass and small change to the place where he had freshly landed and walked off.

"Ninety-six per-cent of all dreams are morphine-white, sir! Not gray, not black, not technicolor, not mauve. Morphine-white, sir! A harsh, blinding white, a white different from any other white! People who say white is white are full of bird ca-ca, sir!"

The old man left off ranting to down the remainder of his white port. He fumbled a bill from his wallet. Currency spilled onto his lap and clumsily he collected the bills and crammed them back into his billfold.

"Innkeeper! More wine, and one for my fellow wanderer here, and see to my horses and carriage!"

"The memory is a storehouse, a scrapbook, a family album. But it is most of all, sir, a data bank! A *bank*. We put in, we take out. Deposits and withdrawals. Who made up the Soviet Politburo in Russia in 1929? Ah, the Murderous Seven, sir! Ordzhonikidze, Kaganovich, Kalinin, Kirov, Voroshilov and Kuibyshev! And who was the seventh? The most savage and murderous of them all, Joseph Stalin. Next to him, Adolph Hitler was a choirboy, sir!"

Milne ordered another vodka collins.

"I live in the Brickmore Apartments, sir! Over on Dalrymple Street. If memory serves, sir, there are exactly 13,280 bricks on the fronting side of the building. How do I know that is the precise number?"

Binoculars, sir! One afternoon I counted them from across the avenue. Left to right, top to bottom. Painstaking work, but if one does not take pains, one does not do the job right, sir! Between each of the building's five floors, there are exactly thirty-six steps. The laundry room is tiled with 212 squares of alternating black and white linoleum tiles. Sir, I can recite the name of every tenant who has resided at the Brickmore Apartments since June, 1973, the month and year my own tenancy began!"

"I'm sure you can," Milne told him.

But the old man was already sprinting off onto other tangential paths. "If memory serves, sir, the first former Little League baseball player to graduate to Major League Baseball was Joey Jay. A pitcher. His team was the Milwaukee Braves. I can recite his lifetime Major League statistics if you wish, sir. In point of fact, sir, I can recite the team and position of every ballplayer who has ever worn a Major League uniform, no matter how briefly or how obscurely! Do you know the name of the only man, for instance, to ever be removed from a Major League game for a midget pinch hitter? Outfielder Hank Saucier, of the St. Louis Browns, sir! The pinch hitter was Eddie Gaedel, a bonified circus midget. He walked on four pitches he couldn't have reached with a barge pole, sir!"

HIS SELF-INDULGENT DIATRIBES NOTWITHSTANDING, there was something very endearing about this aging wino. When most down-and-outers and derelicts had immense trouble even getting two legs into a pair of trousers, here was one who had mastered the art of recall, had trained his mind to store and give up vast amounts of information upon simple demand. True, the bulk of it was about as useful as track shoes on a bird; still, Milne saw the charm and wonder in it.

The bartender was still keeping an eye cast in Milne's direction, perhaps counting the minutes before the old guy began to pose a privacy problem. But Milne wasn't throwing him any high-signs. Not just yet.

"You see, sir, a faulty memory bank can be repaired! Does data fall through the cracks? Where were the car keys left? What *was* the first name of that fellow I met just last week? Did my wife want me to pick up hamburger for dinner or ham for breakfast?

"Ah, the cracks and holes, sir, the cracks and holes! But by sheer force of will, any fool human can make repairs, shore-up, apply mortar. The human memory can be perfected, sir! Not made *perfect*. I didn't say that. Improvement, that is the operative word here. A talent

or gift has to be developed before it can be exploited. Do you see any first-year dental students running out into the world with a drill and a syringe of novocaine in search of somebody with a toothache? Does a novitiate in the study of archaeology tear off to rent a back-hoe to dig up any acre of earth that looks old? Nay, sir! Before exploitation must come development!"

"I can find disagreement with nothing you've said, sir," Milne told him.

"I give you only a rough idea of what this business of memory is all about, sir. Kick me off as a lunatic, it is all true."

Full to the brim of his eyebrows with white port, Milne didn't expect to hear any ebbing in the old man's tidal wave of bellowing. But he had been wrong about drunks before and he was wrong now. The blood-lined eyes now set in a fierce hardness; the puffed lips thinned and drew together like a zipper; the voice lowered and fell to a whisper of determination—or final madness, Milne could not tell which.

"Sir, memories do not vanish. They do not dry up and blow away. They do not escape the brain through portholes or out through the ear canals.

"No, sir. Memories slip into the cracks and crevices of the subconscious. They wander the back corridors of the mind, lost and in dementia like some crazed relative trapped in the maze of the castle's secret passageways. Yes, some of *my own* memories are lost there, sir! Important memories—*vital* important memories! My honor and my sanity depend upon their retrieval!"

With a suddenness Milne did not expect, the old man grabbed the back of Milne's neck with strength that very easily could have been lethal. Milne, not breathing, stared into a single, reddened eye.

"And I'll retrieve these memories, sir! Training the mind to give up its data is like training a wild animal. In the beginning it will resist and refuse. But in the end, the will and determination of the trainer will be stronger and will win out! I guarantee it, sir! Indeed, I stake my life and my reputation on it! The story is too long and complicated to retell to you here. But maybe someday, sir. Maybe someday."

THE BARTENDER HAD BEEN PAYING CLOSE ATTENTION TO them all along, his troubled eyes alert and wary, gaging the oldtimer as though he were an aging prizefighter about to collapse from an endless barrage of punches, judging when to step in.

With a referee's judgment and sense of mercy, he stepped in now. Quietly, he removed the half-full glass of white port from the bartop and laid a soft hand on the old man's shoulder.

"Otto, my friend, you paid a heavy toll to go down the causeway today. Time to turn it around, head on home and fix yourself some dinner."

"He's not any trouble," Milne told the bartender.

"I know. But he's been here since ten o'clock this morning and only a Hotsy Sausage for food standing between then and now."

The old man smiled and rose slowly with a little wobble in his legs. "Innkeeper, I have put up thy wine and have done with the revelry, for the use of these is spent."

"*Hamlet?*" said the bartender.

"I really couldn't say, sir. I am tired and hungry and drunk and so I really couldn't say." The old man turned on unsteady heels and veered for the door. He brushed the juke box, came off it nicely, and in a dozen more uncertain steps was gone.

"Every bar needs a resident barfly," said the bartender, "and Otto is ours in spades. But he's not such a bad sort. Enriches the ambience, without driving people away or breaking anything of value."

"He doesn't look at all well," Milne commented.

"He isn't. A bleeding ulcer, kidney problems, and all that white port doesn't make for an Olympic-class liver. But when you're Otto's age and going downhill, there isn't a whole lot of brake lining left to stop you."

"But he's got a memory on him like a pack of elephants."

"Yeh," said the bartender with a soft smile. "That's what endears him to most of us, all right."

Milne declined another drink. His body temperature had dropped to a tolerable level, he was mildly anesthetized against what remained of the day's heat, and rush-hour traffic would be thinned to a thread. It still bothered him a little that he had not learned what misplaced memories the old man desperately needed to recover in order to restore his honor and self-respect; but perhaps their paths would cross again and Milne would learn the rest of the story.

HAD HE NOT GLANCED DOWN TO CHECK THAT HE DIDN'T slip on the step-up bar, Milne would not have seen the small scrap of paper lying there and would not have been any the worse off for missing it. But he did see it. And he did stoop to pick it up, ever the cop's instinct; perhaps the piece of paper might be something of importance to its owner.

What Milne retrieved was an article clipped from a newspaper and folded into a two-inch square. It had been taken from an uppermost corner of a page, leaving the name of the newspaper and the date

intact: Tucson *Daily Star*, November 26, 1972.

Milne resumed his seat at the bar, centered the news article on the bartop and began to read:

THREE SLAIN IN LOCAL PHARMACY HOLDUP

A Northside pharmacy was held up late last night by two unidentified males, who shot and killed its pharmacist, a clerk and a passerby. Dead are Milos Agaganian, 52, the firm's pharmacist; Gloria VanDerkellen, 29, a clerk at the pharmacy; and Mrs. Otto Greenspan, who had been walking past the store with her husband at the time of the robbery. Greenspan was wounded in the left shoulder and left ear from two shots fired by the robbers as they fled. His wife died instantly from a gunshot in the head. Greenspan was taken to Overbrook Hospital in fair condition.

A police spokesman said a locked vial drawer had been broken into. "We suspect Class A narcotics were kept there," the spokesman said. "Mr. Agaganian's records show he kept supplies of morphine, dilaudid and ritalin, but since we found none of these Class A narcotics anywhere in the building, we must assume the killers got what they came for."

Besides the drugs, an undetermined amount of cash was taken.

No description of the killers was available. Greenspan, the only witness to the incident, told police the two males drove off in a dark-colored sedan, but he could not provide police with the make, model, year or color of the car, nor its license plate number, or if it was an Arizona plate.

"I saw all of those things and I saw the two men when they came out of the pharmacy," Greenspan said. "I even saw what they were wearing and whether they had beards or moustaches or hats. But now I can't remember anything."

Greenspan was admitted to Overbrook suffering traumatic shock, a hospital spokesman

said. Police indicated he would be placed under hypnosis after his recovery in an attempt to learn what Greenspan had witnessed.

"My dear wife has been murdered and I can't even remember the name of a pharmacy in my own neighborhood," Greenspan said. "I feel terrible. I feel I've dishonored her, and lost my own self-respect. If I can't remember, her killers will be uncaught and unpunished. I feel like I've let the whole world down."

The robbery was the eighth pharmacy holdup in the city in recent weeks, but the first in which there were homicides.

(Cont'd—See PHARMACY HOLD UP,
Page 12-A)

Milne did not find the additional material included, but the article's final portions were purely academic. He had stepped inside an air-conditioned bar in search of relief from the heat and instead had found a sad fugitive wandering in search of his memories.

Milne thought of Ulysses returning home to Ithaca as a beggar after twenty years of wandering to defeat all his adversaries to a man, become reunited with his wife and son, reclaim his kingdom and thence to live out his life as an aging hero. Mr. Memory had found no such string of good fortune. Instead, he could lay claim to nothing: not his wife because she was dead; not any son because he had put miles between each of them if a son existed; not his adversaries because they had not yet been dealt their revenge under the law; and not any kingdom because his kingdom was a shabby rooming house on Dalrymple Street and a mind whose storeroom of memories had been ransacked by shock and loss.

Milne refolded the newspaper article on its original folds carefully and slipped it into his wallet. He left the bar, got into the unmarked and began driving in the direction of Dalrymple Street. He could return to Mr. Memory what few memories there were in the aged newspaper article. The remainder of them would be up to Mr. Memory to recall. ●

He found it in the street, and for an instant thought it was a hand. As his fingers closed about it, his thoughts were vague and smeary, like an old poster out too long in the rain. But it was a beginning!

The Glove

by DIANE CHAPMAN

THE GLOVE STARTED EVERYTHING. AT NINE-THIRTY ON A mild March evening in Phoenix, Douglas Henshaw was driving home from the office. Aged forty-three, a corporate accountant, at tax time he always worked late. Traffic was sparse on Nineteenth Avenue but a red light caught him at Indian School Road. A few doors up from the far corner, the sleek, aggressive forks of a row of choppers parked in front of the Paradise Tavern glinted coldly. As he watched, a couple came out of the bar: the girl an anonymous, hipswinging cascade of straight fair hair; the broadshouldered, slimwaisted young man slightly bowlegged, like a tomcat. They mounted one of the bikes. The light changed, but Henshaw eased his '77 Vega forward slowly, anticipating the bike thundering out in his path. It roared onto the pavement, about a car length ahead: the girl, knees splayed, hair flying, leaning against the chromed sissy bar, the young man's back a gleaming black leather wedge in front of her.

Henshaw tasted their oily exhaust. The bike passed under the next street light. He glimpsed some details: the woven handbag dangling from her shoulder, the pair of gloves secured under the left epaulette of his jacket. As the chopper zoomed to the right around the next corner, Henshaw saw something go sailing off and land on the blacktop. A glance in the rearview mirror showed no cars behind him. He coasted

toward the thing in the street. A stomach-dropping shock: for an instant he thought it was a hand. Then the almost simultaneous relieved recognition: one of the biker's gloves. He stopped, opened the door and leaned out. His thoughts as his fingers closed on the glove were vague and smeary, like an old poster out too long in the rain. He managed to focus on only one detail.

Aloud Henshaw said, "He wasn't even as tall as I."

WHEN HE GOT HOME, HIS MOTHER WAS IN THE LIVING room watching the ten o'clock news. Thin, gray, she looked like a molting parrot as she sat hunched in her faded flower-printed bathrobe. Her voice was bird-like too, highpitched and strident.

"Did you remember to get English muffins?"

"No, mother. I'm sorry."

"Douglas, you're getting absentminded. You're working too hard."

"Yes, mother. Do you want me to go out to the Stop and Shop?"

"Don't bother. Just don't forget again tomorrow. And Saturday you're going to trim the pyracantha."

"Yes, mother." He bent and kissed her on the cheek.

In his room he took the glove out of his pocket. Soft black leather, it seemed quite new. He folded it open to reveal the grayish interior, still smoothly sueded and smelling not of sweat or skin but only of itself, a delicious sort of mushroom-and-smoked-meat odor. His right hand slid into it: a perfect fit. Slowly, dreamily, he made a fist.

When do I ever make a fist? he asked himself. He thought of his father, a salesman of office supplies, dead twenty years ago after unsuccessful surgery for a stomach ulcer. "And my father never made a fist either," Douglas Henshaw murmured.

SATURDAY HE ROSE EARLY AND GOT THE HEDGE CLIPPERS from their place on the pegboard in the garage. By eleven he was sweeping the last of the thorny twigs into the second big carton, which he loaded into the trunk of his car. He went inside.

"Mother, I'm going to take the clippings to the dump."

"I remember when they used to have a brush pick-up every other week," she said sourly. "Then all the trash had to be in a container. And now they won't take anything except in those ugly big green things."

"Yes, mother. I'll have to hurry. I think the dump closes at noon. Is there anything you want me to stop for on the way back?"

"No. Go on, Douglas. Don't stand around here."

Up the freeway to Happy Valley Road he drove, then west following

the *City of Phoenix Sanitary Landfill* signs. Looming against the pale turquoise sky, two huge yellow earthmovers lumbered and snorted. A uniformed worker at the gate shack directed him to the foot of a mountain of debris a hundred yards farther on. Behind him squeaked the airbrakes of an immense green garbage truck stopping to check in.

Carrying his first carton to the foot of the slope, Henshaw goggled at the incredible assortment of refuse piled before him: not just kitchen garbage but books, magazines, clothing, appliances, furniture, toys.

"The things people throw away," he muttered with prim disapproval.

By the time he had the second carton in his arms, the garbage truck was bearing down on him from behind. Breathless and intimidated, he hurried forward with his burden. Then he noticed the shoes. A pair of crepe-soled tan chukka boots, their laces knotted together: slightly scuffed, a little soiled, his size or only a trifle larger. As he heaved the carton and bent to pick up the shoes he had no clear thought in his mind, only a vague, insistent image of the biker's glove.

Into the house he scuttled with the shoes under his jacket, hurrying to his room to try them on. An extra pair of socks made them fit tolerably well. Sitting on the edge of his bed, staring down at the stranger's feet that protruded from his pants legs, he remembered high-topped basketball shoes in high school and the shriveling embarrassment of being the player nobody wanted on any team; but, oddly, this time the memory triggered a mindless smile tugging mysteriously at the corners of his mouth.

WEDNESDAY HE RETRIEVED A PAIR OF DARK GREEN
work pants from the dumpster in the alley between the back of his office building and the apartments that fronted the next street. He imagined the man who might wear such pants, a repairman perhaps. A sociable man with many friends, who smoked and swore and drank beer. A happy-go-lucky man who belonged to a bowling league and went to the stock car races on Friday night. Carefully Henshaw folded the pants and put them in his attache case.

A week later, stopping on his way home at the supermarket, he cruised past the overflowing blue and white Goodwill box in a corner of the parking lot and saw, on the ground, a paper sack of clothes. From the top of the sack hung the sleeve of a faded Levi jacket. Nervously he glanced around and stopped the car. Beneath the jacket lay a battered felt hat. He scooped it up too.

In his room that night Henshaw put on the derelict clothes and studied the unknown person in the dresser mirror. With the hat

shadowing his face, the only part of his body he recognized was his bare left hand. It looked soft, clean, out of character. Inexplicably disappointed and disturbed, he returned the garments to the bottom drawer. Lying awake in the dark, he fantasized wearing the jacket to a cowboy bar, dancing with a silent, faceless girl. It seemed as foreign as spreading his arms and flying. Then the fantasy jacket seemed to take hold of him and he *was* flying, faster and faster until his bare left hand, like a giant traffic cop, commanded him to stop.

The next day he saw a narrow red leather belt lolling like a snake's tongue from the grin of a half-open trash can near the post office whence he walked at lunch time to send three registered letters for his company. Coiling the belt, slipping it into his pocket, he thought how unpleasantly thin and supple it felt in his hands. That night the belt appeared repeatedly in his dreams, rearing up before him like a cobra or slithering from shadows and entangling his ankles while he tried to run from unseen menace in dark woods.

Each night Douglas Henshaw dressed in his new clothes. Winding the ends of the red belt around his black-gloved right hand and his bare left, he felt something was eluding him. An unknown word that filled his mouth sensuously, teasingly, making him press the tip of his tongue against the back of his upper front teeth.

APRIL CAME; THE FIFTEENTH DREW CLOSER. HENSHAW became jumpy, impatient. Already the sky stayed light until seven-thirty, almost eight, and soon he would have no more tax time rush to keep him late at the office. It was a relief when his mother announced she wanted the trim on the house painted and he could attack the flaking boards with scraper and wire brush. Clinging to the top of the aluminum ladder, he worked in a kind of frenzy, his mind stifled in the dark vision of the biker's glove.

And then, driving out of the building supply store's parking lot with three gallons of Bavarian Brown semi-gloss enamel on the seat beside him, he found his second glove: a blue and white striped canvas work glove, flattened on the asphalt by unnumbered passing cars.

In his gray combination-lock attache case he put the tan boots and an extra pair of socks, the pants, the hat and the gloves. He took the red belt and the Levi jacket to the bathroom and carefully scrubbed the smooth leather and the metal snaps with a lightly-soaped nail brush and then packed those items also. The case shut with a decisive click.

Sunday morning he began to paint the trim.

All day Monday at work Henshaw struggled to concentrate on ledgers, receipts, tax forms. Momentarily left undisciplined, his

thoughts rushed in a dark whirlwind that spiraled down, down to pierce the side of his attache case and grasp the glove glowing like a black grail in his illusion's core. Hours plodded by. By lunch time he felt lightheaded. At five, when the rest of the staff went home, a fluttering gut sent him scurrying to the men's room. Putting aside his finished work at twenty minutes to eight, his mouth was dry and his hand shook.

The small parking area behind his office was concealed from the street in an unlit corner between the dumpster and a wing of the building. His car was the last in the lot. He climbed in and changed from his work clothes—an immaculate gray three-piece suit, oxford shirt, paisley tie—into the castoffs from his case. His black-gloved right hand fondling the red belt coiled in his pocket, he followed the alley southward toward the downtown section. Few cars passed. At the mouth of each alley he waited for a moment of empty silence before he crossed the street and entered the next dark, narrow passage. In a few blocks he had left all residential buildings behind and the walls of bleak commercial canyons towered above him. Ahead, faintly, Van Buren Street radiated the neon spillage of cheap bars. A little closer and the honk of juke box music drifted back to him.

Clutching by the neck a paper bag in which the shape of a bottle showed clearly, a sagging figure tottered into the alley, rosily back-lit. Henshaw stepped into a doorway and disinterestedly watched the weak figure lean against a wall and swig from his bag. Then, with a grunt, the old man lurched into motion again, his face a stubbly gray moon. At the next street he turned the corner and his shuffling footsteps faded.

HIS OWN MOUTH SLACK, HENSHAW WAITED. HE HAD NO perception of time—seconds passed, centuries passed—and the vaguest awareness of place. Only his hunger mattered, causing him to press the tip of his tongue against the back of his upper front teeth, straining for the sharp consonant that would at last initiate his frustrated articulation.

Eventually another figure entered the alley: a tall, muscular young man, in jeans and a T-shirt, head hanging, both hands pressed over his belly, unsteady on his feet. Henshaw's heart beat with a steady potent rhythm, like a marching army's cadence drum. Despite the dim light he saw the tattoo of an eagle on the young man's bulging, tanned bicep; the thick sunbleached hair curling over his forehead. Suddenly all his senses seemed to become preternaturally intense—he was aware of the scent of clean sweat, beer, a musky after shave—and the explosion in his mouth was a *K* that surged forward, finally ripe and bursting, into

the long, lingering *L* that had tantalized him for so many weeks. He stepped behind the young man, looped the red belt over his blond head and jammed the noose tight with all his strength.

The young man reached back to claw at Henshaw's gloved, straining hands, then lunged from side to side to shake off his attacker. The tension on the belt increased. The young man's hands dropped to his sides and the sudden stink of feces swamped the air. Startled, Henshaw relaxed his grip and took a half step backwards. As he sank to his knees, the young man's hands jerked up again and his harsh cry struggled upward in pitch and volume until Henshaw, leaning over him, crushed it back into his throat.

IN LESS THAN A MINUTE THE LIMP, MOTIONLESS FORM lay crumpled in the shadow of the doorway, the red belt around its neck, and Douglas Henshaw was walking briskly back toward his office.

It had all been over much too quickly, he thought, tossing aside the blue and white striped canvas glove.

He relinquished the battered hat in the lee of the curb at the next intersection. Nothing but a kaleidoscope of sensations to review, to relish.

The Levi jacket landed atop a garbage can. Too bad the pleasure had to be so brief.

Behind his office, re-dressed in his business clothes, he threw the dark green work pants and the suede boots into the dumpster.

But the biker's black leather glove . . . He contemplated it curled in his hand. It was, somehow, too dear, too wonderful to discard. Sighing, he slipped it into his pocket and started the car.

His mother was waiting up for him. "Douglas, you're late."

"Sorry, mother. The seasonal rush is almost over."

"You're not tiring yourself out, are you?"

"No."

"You will finish painting the trim next weekend, won't you?"

"Of course, mother." He bent and kissed her on the cheek. His right hand found the glove in his pocket and closed tenderly, protectively around it. Brooding embryo, it would grow again, assemble another entity around itself: another motley group of rags and rejects that would become a strong, exultant predator. "Of course, mother. I'm looking forward to it."

The murderer had hacked off the important parts, the ones that made the corpse unidentifiable, and then took over his victim's identity. And he was among them now, ready to kill again!

A KILLER AMONG US

by MEL WASHBURN

WHEN ROLLVAG WOKE UP AT FOUR A.M., HE WAS ALREADY in a sweat. *Maybe it's the apprehension*, he thought. *Or maybe it's the heat.* In the city across the river, a series of explosions boomed—probably the engineers destroying VC ammunition dumps—and the birds in the trees screamed a reply.

He got up from his rack and, going to the washbasin, began to dip his hands into the water to wash his face, but then remembered the bugs. Always the drowned bugs every morning. Carefully he skimmed their corpses from the surface of the water and flung them on the floor.

"Hey, Rollie," whispered one of the guys in another bunk, "you going up-country today?"

"Yeah, that's right. Today is the day." He washed his face in the tepid water.

SOME MEN, WHEN THEY WERE OUT IN THE FIELD FOR WEEKS on end, turned all tanned and leathery-looking. Others turned yellowish and waxy, like old candles. Maybe it was just their skin-type. Or maybe it was their mental attitude. The captain was one of the yellowish ones, with moist red eyes and a nervous tic in the left eyelid. "So what can I do for you, Rollvag?" he asked. They were sitting in a

jeep, just about halfway down the road between the Battalion HQ and his company area.

"You can just put me in one of your squads and forget about me. I'm undercover."

"Can you tell if it's drug-related? I'd like to know, if I've got a problem like that in the company."

"No, nothing like that. It's a murder."

The captain blinked slowly. "You mean just a murder? Just one?"

Rollvag knew what he meant. Down in the city, there were five or six thousand dead people, counting all the Arvins, the VC, the civilians—and more than a few Americans. It seemed almost insensitive to be worrying about one little murder.

"This murder is special," Rollvag told him. "An American has killed another American. Killed him and mutilated his corpse, about three weeks ago."

"Sounds more like VC to me. The guy wanders off in the bush or somewhere, and they chop him up. Happens all the time."

Rollvag shook his head. "In this case, the murderer just hacked off the important parts, the ones we could use to ID the corpse, like his fingers and teeth. And then he took the man's clothes, his papers, his entire identity."

"And now he's in our company? One of the new replacements?"

"Yeah, I think so. And I'm going to find him."

The captain smiled grimly. "Well, good luck. We took a lot of losses during the Tet, so about half the company is replacements."

"I know it won't be easy, but I'm going to catch him. We just can't allow Americans to kill other Americans." It's the beginning of the end, the general had told Rollvag, when we start killing each other. We just can't allow it.

Rollvag knew everything about the murderer: knew his age (27); knew his real name (Emil Fischer); knew everything but what he looked like: no one could find a photo of the guy anywhere, because he'd been working for the CIA, and they'd kept his appearance a secret. He'd been organizing assassination teams out in the boonies, personally (some people said) beheading VC cadres by the dozen. Until he finally went over the edge and drew up his own personal list of "traitors," including the Arvin general staff, one of whom actually died by poison.

Our allies had put Fischer on trial and then locked him up in the psycho ward at their Do Hong Military Hospital. "He was a supremely effective operative," the CIA section chief had told Rollvag. "I never really believed he'd gone bad."

"You were close to him?"

"As close as you could get."

"Then do you have a photo of him I could use?"

"No I don't."

"Well, could you describe him?"

The section chief had pulled at his ear. "No, I couldn't. If as you say he's escaped from Do Hong and is headed up-country, into the thick of the fighting, he can't really be said to be running away. Obviously he's going up there to kill Communists. I won't interfere with that. It's what we're all here for."

ROLLVAG FOUND HIS PLATOON STRUNG OUT ALONG THE dike at the edge of a big rice paddy, lying up for noon. They had their machine guns set up and from time to time someone peered over the dike at a collection of tin-roofed huts where no one seemed to be living. But mostly the men seemed relaxed, unconcerned, almost playful. They complained about the food—which all came from brown cans and all tasted like tin. They made jokes about sex and death.

Rollvag was assigned to first squad by the top sergeant, Sinclair, a leathery man in his thirties probably, a lifer by the look of him, with screaming eagles tattooed on his forearm. "You been up-country before?" he asked Rollvag.

"Three months in the mountains."

"Well, down here it's different. No hills to hump. And no real jungles. And also a lot more civilians, some of which aren't really civilians. So stay alert. But don't go firing your weapon without good cause. We're not going to win their hearts and minds by shooting their heads off. You understand?"

"Yeah, sure."

"What's with the Top?" Rollvag asked as he hunkered down with his squad at the end of the dike. "He acts like I'm a war criminal already."

"Sinclair be wrapped a little tight," said a muscular black man who turned out to be the squad's corporal. "But he knows the business, don't he, fellas?" The men nodded their agreement. "So I follow him. And you follow me. And everything be cool." He handed Rollvag a small brown can and a "John Wayne" can opener. "Have some peaches, Rollvag, and welcome to the squad."

Rollvag was about halfway through the peaches—warm and sweetly cloying—when he heard the "*Lubb-ah! Lubb-ah! Lubb-ah!*" of low-flying helicopters, and a pair of Huey gunships drifted in over the fields.

"Here we go," said the corporal. "Drop your socks and prime your

locks." The men groaned and tossed their unfinished dinners into the muddy water at their feet.

MANY OF THE PEOPLE IN THE COMPANY WERE TOO young to be Emil Fischer. And half of them were black. And some of the rest had been with the company for longer than three weeks. So by a process of elimination, Rollvag narrowed his suspects down to seven men, one of whom was in the first squad with him.

The man's name was Martin Gable, but they called him "the Panda" because of the dark, almost black circles around his eyes. Panda claimed he never slept; he mistrusted everyone; and he talked to himself all the time. Rollvag wondered if three years in a South Vietnamese mental hospital might not reduce even the CIA's most efficient assassin to something like the Panda, a classic delusional paranoid. Or, on the other hand, Panda's eccentric behavior might all be a cunning act. Either way, it was just possible he was the man Rollvag was looking for.

He and Panda were assigned to work together on the squad's machine gun. Panda was the officially-designated gunner, but the two of them took turns carrying the big gun on the trail. Rollvag walked next to Panda, when he could, and asked him questions. But Panda was not much with answers. Most often he would just grin a yellow-toothed-grin and mutter something like, "Yeah, I guess. I dunno."

Yet when Panda was walking all alone, he never stopped talking to himself. Rollvag had heard somewhere that the CIA trained its men to control their confessional impulses by confessing to themselves. Perhaps this was Panda's game. Rollvag would have given a lot to hear what he was telling himself, but the Panda wouldn't let him.

ABOUT FOUR DAYS AFTER ROLLVAG JOINED THE PLATOON, his squad and another one were sent out on an ambush, which meant that they positioned themselves during the day and then stayed awake all night, hoping the VC would come along. The top sergeant himself led the two squads on this mission, putting each man exactly where he wanted him and giving exact instructions. "Be sure to verify your targets," was the last thing he said to Rollvag and the Panda before leaving them alone at night-fall.

Panda had the big gun. Rollvag had a pistol and some flares. They were dug in beside a dense clump of bushes and trees midway on the path between a village and the ruins of an old temple. All night long, they lay awake. At first they stayed absolutely quiet, the way you're supposed to on an ambush. But then, after a while, the Panda began

muttering to himself, apparently forgetting—in the darkness and heat of the night—that Rollvag was lying right next to him, hearing every word.

Rollvag listened to what Panda said: it was all obscenity and keen, unreasoning fear. This was no act: the Panda was genuinely nuts. But he was entirely the wrong kind of nuts for a cold-blooded homicide. So Rollvag mentally scratched his name from the list of suspects. He wasn't Emil Fischer.

All night they lay awake, and not a single VC did they hear. But then, about three AM, the grey light of false dawn began to flood the sky and a million birds began to squawk and warble in the trees. "Huh? What's that?"

"It's nothing, Panda. Just the birds and the sun."

Panda gripped the trigger guard on his machine gun and worked the bolt back and forth. "There's something on the trail!"

Rollvag looked. The path was a dirty grey shadow winding its way toward them from the blackness of the tree line. Something moved: it was like the fluttering of a butterfly or the winking of a candle flame. It moved closer. "Let me set off a flare, we'll see what it is for sure."

"Yeah, you bet," chuckled the Panda, and he cut loose with a burst from the machine gun, deafening Rollvag and obliterating whatever it was on the trail.

Which turned out to be an old lady with a jug full of flowers. Apparently she'd been going to the temple at the end of the path. Rollvag, Panda, and Top Sergeant Sinclair stood looking down at what was left of her. "You didn't verify your target," said the Top.

"Yeah, I guess. I dunno," the Panda giggled helplessly.

"You take the big gun," Sinclair told Rollvag, "and join up with your squad. Give Panda your sidearm."

Rollvag traded weapons with Panda and walked reluctantly away. When he was out of sight of the two men, around a bend in the trail, he heard one pistol shot. And he heard Panda scream.

When we begin shooting each other, it's the beginning of the end. Officially, for the record, Panda had stumbled and shot himself in the knee. He would be given a Purple Heart and sent home, where the VA would buy him a plastic leg that worked almost as good as the original. And he wouldn't be shooting any more old ladies in Viet Nam.

Probably it was the best arrangement, all round. But Rollvag had to believe that the Top, not chance, had fired that pistol out on the trail.

"YOU FIND YOUR MURDERER YET?" THE CAPTAIN ASKED him confidentially the next day. His skin was waxier and more yellow

than ever. The tic in his left eyelid was worse.

"I'm closing in on him, I think."

"Well, if he escaped from some prison just to come to this hell-hole, I guess he's crazy enough to be dangerous." The captain laughed. "I hope you catch him."

That evening Rollvag asked the black corporal, "You know anything about the Top? About before he joined this company?" They were sitting on the dirt floor of the squad's hooch, heating up some canned stew on an alcohol stove. The stew smelled like warm motor oil.

"We ought to of drunk this fuel, stead of burning it up in the stove," said the corporal, smiling. "Might help the stew go down better that way. "His eyes and teeth glowed orange in the light of the alcohol flame.

"You didn't answer my question."

"I know what the top told me, is all."

"What was that?"

The corporal poked his finger in the stew and tasted it "You better ask him your own self."

The top sergeant had a small hooch all his own. He sat in the doorway, in the moonlight, with his legs crossed and his back straight as a poker. "The thing with the Panda, that on your mind?"

"Partly." A man who would do such a thing to the Panda was a man who set himself above the law. A man who would draw up his personal list of traitors and begin poisoning them.

"I didn't shoot him. He shot himself."

"But not by accident?"

"I gave him the choice. A leg wound by his own hand or one in the gut by mine. He chose the leg, but still made a mistake. He should have aimed for the meat, not the knee. Less chance of crippling yourself that way. The sergeant's features in the moonlight were hawk-like, serene. "You're not what you seem. Not just another grunt, I can tell. You're here on a mission. Maybe a crusade."

"Maybe so."

"I know about crusades." He uncrossed his legs. "I want to show you something. In my footlocker." He ducked into his hooch. It was just a deep hole, its walls built up a couple of feet with sandbags and topped off with a tarpaper roof. Rollvag heard the double click of Sinclair unlocking his footlocker. And then with a bang the roof blew off the hooch and a ball of flame rolled out the door.

SOMEONE HAD BOOBY-TRAPPED THE FOOTLOCKER WITH
an incendiary grenade. But Sinclair was a tough man; he had not died.

They put him in the field hospital, because he was too critical to move farther, and they gave him the best care they could.

"What was he going to show me?" Rollvag asked the black corporal.

"His papers. He used to be an officer, a major. Got busted down to sergeant."

"How come?"

"Long story. He was operating with the Arvins' Rangers out in the Triangle. Advising. And those Rangers were commanded by this colonel, the brother of their president or something, an important little guy. He had this way of questioning prisoners: he tied one out on the front of a howitzer, the prisoner didn't talk, the little colonel pulled the lanyard, made chicken salad of the guy. Just ugly, you know? At first, Sinclair didn't say anything. But the little colonel, he got to exploding little kids, old ladies, just for fun like. So Sinclair snaps some pictures, he goes right to the U.S. Embassy in Saigon. What can the Arvins do? Sinclair's got their little colonel cold. They got to punish him, but they also raise a stink about the whole thing.

"And the U.S. brass ain't too happy about the deal anyway. So they cook up these charges, Sinclair should of gone through channels, he breached security and discipline . . . you know the talk. And the next thing, Sinclair ain't an officer anymore. But he stayed in the service anyway, because he's dedicated."

"And you believe all this?"

"I seen the papers. I know the man."

Rollvag thought a moment. "What happened to the Arvin colonel?"

"What you suppose?" The corporal made a face of disgust. "They should of shot him. But they got one of their courts to declare him crazy, they locked him up in some fancy mental hospital, it's just for VIP's."

"Do Hong?"

"Something like that."

It all made sense now, in a loony sort of way. Emil Fischer, locked up in Do Hong Hospital, had heard the Arvin colonel's story and added Sinclair to his list of traitors. Then he escaped and, either through chance or design, murdered a soldier who was being sent up-country as a replacement in Sinclair's own company and had taken on that soldier's identity. Emil Fischer was, like Rollvag himself, here on a mission. And he wouldn't rest until his mission was completed—until Sinclair was dead.

IN THE FIELD HOSPITAL THEY HAD IMPROVISED A STERILE burn ward by hanging thick plastic curtains around Sinclair's bed.

He was severely dehydrated, so they were running quart after quart of Lactated Ringers Solution into his veins. He was in agony, so they kept him heavily sedated. And he was in danger, so Rollvag hid himself in a small closet with a little peephole, right next to the burn ward.

All through the long day he watched the nurses and doctors come and go, checking the patient's vital signs, giving him injections, replenishing his IV bottles. All that day, he watched and waited for Emil Fischer to make his move. Pretty soon, he heard, Sergeant Sinclair would be well enough to be transferred to the rear areas.

Maybe even the next morning.

All that night, he chewed Benzedrine tablets to keep himself awake. His vision became slightly bleary, and nearby sounds took on a distant, echoing quality. But he was alert enough, he thought, for the job at hand.

About midnight, the nurses turned down the lights in the ward. About one o'clock they came to change the patient's dressings. About three o'clock in the morning Sinclair's IV bottle seemed to be running low. Then about three-thirty a nurse, fully clothed in surgical scrubs, with a sterile mask over her face and sterile bonnet covering her hair, felt her way through the layers of plastic sheeting around Sinclair's bed.

Slowly she clamped off the IV tubing, disconnected the bottle, then took a fresh one from the supply locker at the bedside. Then she connected the bottle and unclamped the tubing.

Then she took a careful look around her.

Between the mask and the bonnet only her forehead and eyes were visible. Her skin was a sickly, candleyellow, the color of a person who's been too long up-country. Her eyes were moist and red. Her left eyelid twitched rapidly with an insistent, neurotic tic.

Rollvag had seen those eyes before.

From inside her surgical gown, she brought out a large hypodermic syringe and poked the needle into the tubing running into Sinclair's arm. "Hold it right there, captain!" shouted Rollvag, stepping out of the closet and aiming his .45 pistol. "Stop! NOW!"

But the watery red eyes just glared at him in defiant exultation. And the gloved hand pressed down the plunger on the syringe.

Rollvag fired three rounds into Emil Fischer's chest, but it was too late. He'd already injected Sinclair with enough poison to kill the entire Arvin general staff three times over.

And Rollvag himself had now killed a fellow American. ●

The old man had taken only a few steps when strong hands grabbed him from behind. His wobbly legs failed him and he fell hard to the concrete pavement!

A Dog's Best Friend

by DICK STODGHILL

THE OVERSIZED MONGREL STOOD PATIENTLY WHILE HIS master worked with shaky fingers on the knot that would secure the rope leash to a metal post. Satisfied, the old man stroked the dog's head and said, "Now you wait right here, Blackie. I won't be long and then we'll get you a nice treat."

Blackie settled himself on the warm concrete, forelegs crossed, chin resting on them, watery old eyes fixed on the pawnshop door his master had entered. The routine was familiar, but Blackie never felt comfortable until the old man reappeared.

Bennie Lowe watched from a doorway fifty feet away. He often had noticed the old man and his dog and now a plan took shape in Bennie's mind. Few people were on the street so it would be a piece of cake, he thought, a pushover.

A few minutes passed, Blackie watching the door, Bennie watching it too. When the old man came out patting the pocket of the shabby

jacket containing his wallet, Bennie moved quickly. The old man had taken only a few steps when strong hands grabbed him from behind, one reaching for the opening of the jacket.

"Gimme that, man," Bennie snarled.

"No!" cried the old man, clamping his right arm over the front of the jacket, struggling to keep his assailant's hand from getting inside.

Blackie, teeth bared and growling deep in his throat, lunged toward them but the rope held.

The tussle continued a few seconds, Bennie gradually gaining the upper hand. When the wallet finally was in his grip he gave the old man a hard shove, then turned and ran toward a nearby alley. The old man staggered back, fighting to regain his balance. His wobbly legs failed him and he fell hard, striking his head on a jagged break between strips of concrete.

Still Blackie tried to reach him, but the rope held firm. A man ran from the pawnshop and knelt beside the old man. Others hurried up and the kneeling man told the first, "Call the police and an ambulance."

Blackie, confused, excited, paced back and forth, whimpering and trying every few seconds to get to his master.

Within moments a police car pulled to the curb near the crowd gathered around the still figure on the sidewalk. A young policeman herded the bystanders away while his middle-aged partner crouched beside the old man, feeling for a pulse. When the young policeman bent down the other stared at him, raising his eyebrows. "I think we got ourselves a murder, buddy," he said softly.

Blackie continued to pace and whine during the few minutes it took the ambulance to arrive. Two paramedics worked briefly over the old man, then lifted the frail body onto a stretcher. As they carried it to the ambulance Blackie howled mournfully, straining at his leash, still unable to reach his master.

"That's his dog," said one of the onlookers. The young policeman edged near Blackie, talking softly, trying to calm him. As the ambulance pulled away Blackie let out a frenzied howl and lunged after it. The rope still held but the worn leather collar snapped. Blackie raced down the street, continuing the chase long after the ambulance had disappeared in the distance.

BENNIE LOWE READ THE NEWSPAPER STORY HESITANTLY, sounding out the words with his lips and shaking his head.

"Crazy ol' man," he muttered to himself. "Why'd he go an' gimme trouble like this?"

He looked up and down the street warily, then aloud said, "I better split this place a while." The newspaper fell from his fingers as he walked quickly away in the direction of the bus station.

JOE HANLEY LET THE REPORT DROP TO THE DESK TOP and leaned back in his chair, eyes not seeing the smoky buff wall they had settled on. He poked a finger around in his right ear and said, "From the description we got, it could be about anybody."

His partner, Caproletti, waved his hand deprecatingly. "You call that a description? It's *nothing*. All we can do is wait and see what we get back from the street, if anything."

"Yeah, I know. I guess nobody's going to get too excited about it, anyway. No survivors, just a few cronies as old as he was. It burns me, though. An eighty-year-old man downtown in broad daylight and with a dog, even."

"What about the dog?"

"Hasn't turned up yet. Probably ran itself to death after that ambulance or got hit along the way."

THE SIGN ON THE BANK ACROSS FROM THE PARK DISPLAYED 78 degrees but a heavy sweater and wool jacket hung loosely on the shoulders of the man who approached the bench with jerky, stiff-legged steps. He eased himself down beside the pair already there and said, "I seen Blackie again but he wouldn't come to me just like before. I can't figure what's wrong with him."

The man at the far end snorted. "He lost his best friend and he don't have a home, that's what's wrong with him."

"But what's he eating?" whined the first man. "And where's he staying nights?"

"He's eating outta the cans and he's probably spending his nights right here in the park."

"Too bad," said the man in the middle. "Old Jack'd feel bad if he knew about that."

"Well, I done everything I know how," the first man said. "Blackie just don't seem to want to have nothing to do with his old friends."

JONAS DECKER STOOD SCOWLING ON THE SIDEWALK OUTSIDE his men's wear store. "There's that dog again," he called to the man washing a window thirty feet away. The man glanced over his shoulder to the other side of the street and nodded.

"I don't like it," Jonas continued. "It's not good for business, having a dog running around loose like that all the time. Scares off

customers."

The other man leaned the long-handled squeegee against the window and walked over, grinning. "It's not the dog that scares off customers, Jonas, it's your prices. That dog's not doing any harm, he's just looking for his master. He won't give up and it's kind of sad after all this time."

"Sad, is it? Scary, I'd call it. Look at him sniffing at people like he always does. I don't care what you say, that dog's dangerous."

The other man chuckled. "I told you, Jonas, he's looking for his master."

"Can't he tell his master without sniffing at everybody? Besides, that old man's been dead three months, so if that dog hasn't any better sense than to think he's coming back it just proves he shouldn't be hanging around like he does. I can't figure what's wrong with those people out at the animal shelter. I've called three times now and you'd think they could manage to catch one old dog."

His companion shook his head. "They'll never catch that dog, Jonas, so you might just as well accept the fact. Forget about it; that dog's not bothering you any."

"He'll bother somebody one of these days, mark my words. I've a good notion to bring a gun down here and get rid of it myself."

The other man laughed and turned back toward his store. "That dog's no more dangerous than I am, Jonas. But let me know if you bring that gun down because I don't want to be out on the street when some old fool starts shooting one off."

"LOOKS LIKE WE CAN PUT THIS ONE AT THE BACK OF THE drawer, Cap," said Hanley. He tapped the bottom of a file folder on the desk and studied his partner's response.

Caproletti nodded. "It could have been there all along, Joe. Unless we get a break when we collar somebody on another charge we can forget it."

"I hear the dog's been hanging around the low end of downtown."

"Still trying to find the old man, I guess."

"Think so, Cap? Maybe he's looking for the guy that killed him."

Caproletti grinned. "Sure, Joe. Now we've got dog detectives, huh? Well, I hope his luck is better'n ours."

BENNIE LOWE GLANCED AROUND CAUTIOUSLY AS HE stepped off the Trailways bus, then chided himself for being foolish. No one was looking for him; he was home scot-free. The police didn't have a thing to go on, not one. And they wouldn't get one, he thought,

pleased with his cleverness in pulling the job without leaving a trace and then having the good sense to get out of town a while, just in case.

He walked three blocks east to Main Street, then south to the old neighborhood. His first stop, he decided, would be the liquor store for a bottle and then he'd check his old building, see if a room was available.

The dog came up on him from behind, sniffing at his pant leg. Bennie snarled, "Get away, mutt!" and lashed out at it with his foot.

"I KNEW IT," EXCLAIMED JONAS DECKER. "I TOLD THEM that dog was dangerous, but nobody paid any attention. Now look what's happened."

"You see it?" asked Hanley.

"Yes I saw it. I've been watching that animal, I knew it was vicious. You know who's to blame for this, don't you? Those people at the animal shelter. All the times I called out there and they couldn't even catch one dog."

Hanley nodded toward the other side of the street where a man was muzzling the black dog lying quietly on the sidewalk in front of the pawnshop. "Doesn't look like the guy's having any trouble with him now."

"Sure, now that it's too late."

Hanley walked across to where Caproletti was standing and watched as the old dog was lifted into the caged bed of a pickup truck. "Good thing we came out, Cap. Decker says it's the old man's dog, all right."

He kneeled beside the body a moment, then looked up. "Doesn't look like he even bit the guy."

"He didn't," said Caproletti. "You know who it is, don't you? Our old friend Bennie Lowe."

Hanley straightened up, nodding. He gave Caproletti an owlish look. "Think maybe it worked out like we were talking about? That dog's been sniffing at people right along, but this is the first one he's gone after."

Caproletti flashed a sneer at his partner. "Come on, Joe, you know better. So it's the kind of job Bennie Lowe might have pulled, what's that prove? Bennie gives the dog a good kick, the dog snaps at him, Bennie runs, trips over that jagged break there in the concrete and smashes his head against the post. It's as simple as that."

Hanley grinned a little. "Maybe, Cap. Maybe it won't go in the report, but what you wanna bet we won't be pulling that file again?" •

MIKE'S MAIL
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THE MIKE SHAYNE DETECTIVE CLUB?

Please send me information on how I can join the Mike Shayne Detective Club and get a decoder to decode the secret message in the March issue of MSMM.

Doug M. Jordan
540 Jones St. #415
San Francisco, CA 94102

Oops, sorry, Doug, but the detective club is unfortunately a figment of my imagination, inspired by the Good Old Days when Doc Savage and The Shadow and others had clubs with badges and secret messages and so forth. I didn't mean to lead you astray—just to have some fun and fill up some space at the end of a story. Actually, there is a message in there (and in the others) that can be easily solved if you put your mental decoder to work on it.

A VOTE FOR THE ED

The "Mike's Mail" letter department in your June 1984 issue had the distinct "aroma" of a complaint sheet. I have read your magazine for several years and have been consistently impressed with the well-balanced variety of well-crafted stories in each issue. If I have any complaint at all, it's that the magazine is only about half the length it should be. But that really isn't a complaint; just wishful thinking—in view of today's publishing costs! I sincerely hope you will continue to publish the blend of traditional and off-beat mystery which has made *Mike Shayne Mystery Magazine* a leader in its field.

Bobby G. Warner
5 Melrose Drive
Wedgefield, SC 29168

Thanks for the vote of confidence. I need it once in a while. It suddenly occurred to me, by the way, that in the twenty-five plus years MSMM has been around, I've been editing it for the past five (my first issue was November 1979). My, how the time flies when you're having fun.

Actually, it hasn't all been fun. Getting a magazine out month after month after month is more work than probably most readers realize. Just reading the hundreds of manuscripts that never see their way into the pages is a chore and a half, and there's nothing to show for it in the finished product. There have been some high points during this past half-a-decade: dropping the crude interior spot drawings, using some pretty good covers, starting a letter column, running artwork by Frank Hamilton and Fred Fredericks, publishing first stories by talented new writers. And, of course, some low points: continuity screwed up by temporary layout artists, typos passed by inept or careless proof-readers, occasional lapses of good taste by an editor that either tried too hard or who didn't try hard enough.

There will still be problems, of course, and errors and disputes, and so forth, but all in all I think MSMM has been a pretty lively magazine and will continue to be one worth reading by mystery fans.

Stiff Competition

BOOK REVIEWS by JOHN BALL

Gerald Petievich is a special agent of the United States Secret Service who, not long ago, attracted much favorable notice with a book called *To Die in Beverly Hills*. Now he has drawn on his fourteen years of professional experience to come up with a compelling, well plotted story about a master counterfeiter and two federal agents who are determined to bring him down. The book, which is called *To Live and Die in L.A.*, is a winner from the first page. There is action, some violence, a little sex, and, above all, a sense of presence that makes the reader feel he is part of everything that is going on. The investigation is thoroughly realistic, even when the agents go beyond the book to try and get the man they are after. There are informers who lie, crooks who double cross, and all of the other impedimenta that every experienced law enforcement officer knows. This is a well written, informative, and grittily real book that deserves wide attention. (Arbor House, \$14.95.)

☆ ☆ ☆

The early 19th Century was a famous period in crime history. At that time the Bow Street Runners made up a loosely-organized law enforce-

ment agency in England. Both crime and punishment were very different then, as were the methods of detection. J. G. Jeffries has created a vivid picture of those colorful days with his novels about Bow Street Runner Jeremy Sturrock. Mr. Sturrock, who would never have been hanged for modesty, tell of his own exploits as a detective and thief taker. The latest book in the series, *The Pangersbourne Murders*, is a rewarding entertainment. In essence it is a sequel to *Captain Bolton's Corpse* and features the same self-centered, impossible little girl known as Peggotty, who, it seems, has some claim to noble birth. To confirmed bachelor Sturrock she is a pest, but an engaging one. Murder is done and a good crime story follows. Much of the charm of this book is in the background of the year 1815 and the way that life was lived then. (Walker and Co., \$12.95.)

★ ★ ★

Meredith Phillips makes an impressive debut as a crime novelist with *Death Spiral*, which deals with the figure skating competition at the Winter Olympics. When a famed Russian skater is done in, world class British athlete Lesley Grey turns detective to try and solve his murder. She investigates the crime while also taking part in intense competition, both on and off the ice. Author Phillips has created a rich and realistic atmosphere with all of the pressures to which Olympic athletes are subjected. Even if skating isn't your sport, you will find yourself involved in this very engaging work, which includes intrigue, international love affairs, the KGB, the techniques of figure skating, and, of course, the police. This is a much better than average sports-oriented mystery. (Preservance Press, \$6.95 in trade paperback.)

★ ★ ★

Marc Lovell offers another fun adventure with British intelligence agent Appleton Porter in *How Green Was My Apple*. Porter is a not-too-gifted spy who stands six-feet-seven and is given to blushing. He is, however, a polyglot, fluent in a wide variety of languages. He takes great pride in his profession and usually manages to succeed, one way or another. When he is assigned to work with a female operative, and discovers that she is six-feet-one in her bare feet, his joy is complete. But wait . . . ! Obviously there is much more to come. A good entertainment (Doubleday Crime Club, \$11.95.)

★ ★ ★

Cay Van Ash, who was a friend of Sax Rohmer and his biographer, is the latest to produce a pastiche about Sherlock Holmes. In *Ten Years Beyond Baker Street* he brings Holmes into combat with Dr. Fu Manchu himself on the bleak seashore of Wales. It is not Dr. Watson who tells the story, but his colleague, Dr. Petrie, who normally recounts the adventures of Sir Dennis Nayland Smith, the perpetual adversary of Fu Manchu. Dr. Petrie entices Holmes out of retirement to lock horns with the master of the Si Fan. Mr. Van Ash writes very well, although the decisiveness of Holmes is not as apparent as might be expected. Dr. Watson, be it noted, is a hard act to follow. We get a glimpse or two of Karamaneh, the exotic Egyptian beauty who is the future Mrs. Petrie, and some of the other well-known members of Fu Manchu's establishment. Holmes vs. Fu Manchu is a valid engagement; perhaps we will hear more of it in the future. (Harper and Row, \$14.95.)



There is an increasing number of academic works being published on the subject of crime fiction. An interesting new one, especially for the scholar, is called *The Doomed Detective* and subtitled, "The Contribution of the Detective Novel to Postmodern American and Italian Fiction." Professor Tani writes well and makes his points with clarity. This book is not for popular consumption: it is a learned work that will find its main audience in academic circles and with those who are making a serious study of this once-neglected art form. In this context, it is an impressive and substantial contribution. (Southern Illinois University Press, price not given.)



Dorothy Salisbury Davis, long a pillar of the Mystery Writers of America, is noted for her deft skill in creating crime stories where sophistical suspense is the key and violence does not intrude. In her latest book, *Lullaby of Murder*, she brings back reporter Julie Hayes who works for a major gossip columnist and doubles as an unofficial detective. When her boss is murdered, Julie takes on the job of finding his killer. Along the way she encounters a Broadway publicist, a man trying to bring back the dance marathon, and a Mafia gangster who is her somewhat distant friend. If intellectual mysteries are to your taste, you will enjoy this one very much. (Scribners, \$12.95.)



Attorney Carson Wolfe (a pseudonym) debuts as a novelist with *Murder at la Marimba*. The setting is the south Bronx, one of the most devastated urban areas in the nation. Much of the book is concerned with the rivalry between the Puerto Ricans who live in this section of New York and their Columbian counterparts. When young Ricky Betancourt gets into a fight at a local disco, he ends up in the hospital with a stab wound in the stomach and facing a charge of murder laid against him. He is defended by the mother of his girl friend and her sometime lover, who is an attorney. The background is well drawn and the people are real. There are some courtroom scenes that are quite realistic, but they are overshadowed by the superb ones in Henry Denker's recent masterpiece, *Outrage*. (published by Morrow and Co.) With this reservation, an engaging debut. (St. Martins, \$10.95.)

★ ★ ★

PAPERBACK NOTES: There are now several current series of mystery classic reprints. "Quill Mysterious Classics" are offered by Morrow; recent titles include W. R. Burnett's *The Asphalt Jungle*, Harold Q. Masur's *Bury Me Deep*, *The Bigger They Come* by A. A. Fair (Erle Stanley Gardner), and the unusually good *Night of the Jabberwock* by Fredric Brown . . . "Scribner's Crime Classics" now include *The Scarab Murder Case* by S. S. Van Dine, *The Will of the Tribe* by Arthur Upfield, and *The Red Pavilion*, one of Judge Dee's celebrated cases, by Robert van Gulik . . . The Foul Play Press offers two of Bill Pronzini's "nameless detective" works, *Snatch* and *Vanished*, and also *Introducing Chip Harrison*, a two book anthology (*No Score* and *Chip Harrison Scores Again*) under the author's real name, Lawrence Block . . . Harper and Row's extensive "Perennial Library" has added some impressive titles, such as *Bait on the Hook* by Frank Parrish, *The Snow Tiger* by Desmond Bagley, and Ross Thomas's *Yellow Dog Contract* . . . Dell continues its successful "Murder Ink" and "Scene of the Crime" reprints with the A. A. Milne classic *The Red House Mystery*, *Murder in the Title* by Simon Brett, *Murder on Cue* by Jane Dentinger, and Reginald Hill's *A Pinch of Snuff* . . . There are more that we will report on next month. ●

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